Guardian of Heaven and Earth - Rota

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(Book 8 of the Guardian of the Spirit series)

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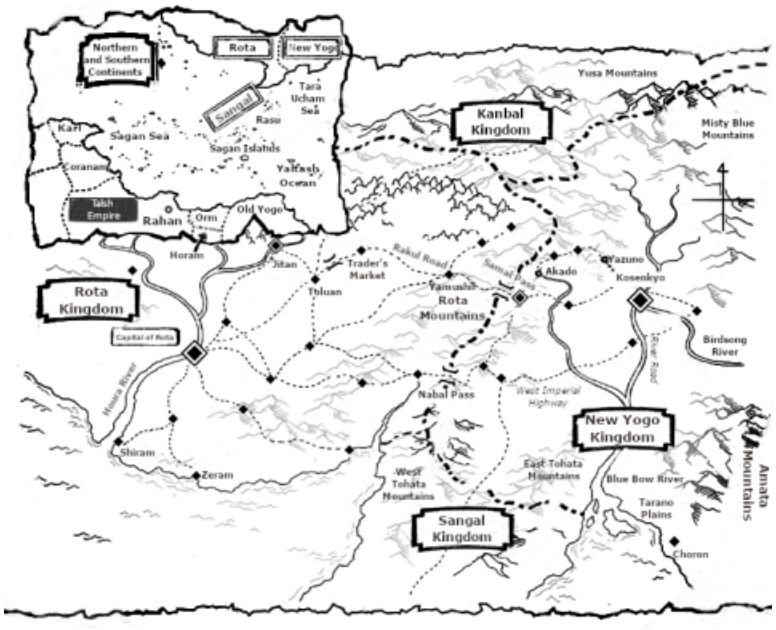
Northern and Southern Continents
Rota
New Yogo
Sangal
Tara
Ucham Sea
Rasu
Kari
Sagan Sea
Sagan Islands
Coranam
Yalfash Ocean
Talsh Empire
Rahan
Orm
Old Yogo
Horam
Jitan
Trader's Market
Toluan
Rota Kingdom
Capital of Rota
Hoara River
Rakul Road
Yamunhot
Rota Mountains
Jamal Pass
Akado
Kazuno
Kosenkyo
Yusa Mountains
Misty Blue Mountains
Kanbal Kingdom
Birdsong River
Nabal Pass
West Imperial Highway
New Yogo Kingdom
Shiram
Zeram
West Tohata Mountains
East Tohata Mountains
Blue Bow River
Tarano Plains
Choron
Amata Mountains
Sangal Kingdom

Excerpt of a Letter from Chagum to Shuga

...Maybe you wish I hadn't chosen this path. You'll probably think that it's childish and hopeless—I can understand that. But Shuga, I'm an adult now, and I'm making the best choices I can. I've seen the vastness of the southern continent with my own eyes. Talsh is such a large and wealthy empire that I lack the words to adequately describe it. New Yogo might as well be a worm wriggling at the Talsh empire's feet. Even if we all worked together in full cooperation, out nation would never be considered more than a pest to the Talsh.

Shuga, I know that what I'm trying to do is foolish. I'm only doing it because I believe it will prevent the pointless deaths of innumerable innocent people. Second Prince Raul is arrogant and proud. He wished me to return home and capitulate to the Talsh empire in exchange for sparing my life and the lives of our people. I might have agreed to his terms if he would allow our people to live in peace and happiness, but that's not the case, Shuga. If it were, I would never have thrown my dignity and possibly even my life away to save them.

I know what kind of darkness we would fall into if Talsh took over. If New Yogo submits to Talsh rule, our people would be conscripted and sent to fight wars in Rota and Kanbal. They would order us to kill the people in other nations who have long been our friends. And they would do the same thing to Rota and Kanbal after they are conquered. Talsh thinks nothing of sending friends to kill friends or causing long alliances to break down. I don't want out people to have to follow such terrible orders.

I may have been born the son of the Mikado, but I've never wanted to rule. However, my place is such that I can't simply stand by and watch our people be slaughtered, or forced to slaughter others. I'm going to do all I can to ensure that everyone is remains alive, safe, and free.

It may be too much to ask, but I want you to have hope, Shuga. Even Talsh has its weak points. Prince Raul and his older brother Prince Hazar are often at odds and don't agree on how to conquer the northern continent. Prince Hazar even tried to assassinate me. I think that their internal dissension could be exploited if we learned more about it. Talsh certainly isn't impossible to defeat.

The King of Rota is an honorable man. I am going to meet him and propose an alliance for the sake of the future peace and happiness for both our nations. I believe that I will be successful. My path is clear. I may not be able to see every step, but I know exactly where I'm going—and why.

So have hope. I'll be home someday.

—Chagum

Prologue - River of Light

The bright light of sudden fire flared up in the darkness. The reflection of several pine torches were reflected in the surface of the river below. Dim outlines of fishing boats were faintly visible in the torchlight.

"Ah! It's time! It's time!"

An old man stood in the tall, dry grass near the riverbank, carrying his grandchild on his back. His son and other family were on the water, carrying the torches. This was the first time the old man's grandson had watched the family fishing at night, so the old man held up a candle and pointed out all the details that were visible.

"Won't the fishies burn?" his grandson asked when he saw the torches.

"No, no, the fish won't burn. We're just trying to surprise them. They're still sleepy, so they'll swim wherever they're guided. But they'll need to yell louder and direct the light better, or the fish will all swim off in the wrong direction."

The old man's son and the other men in boats all waved their torches frantically and cursed.

The old man's grandson poked him in the shoulder and whispered, "Grandpa, there's fire there, too! Look!"

The old man's eyes scanned the river's surface. "Where?"

Only one family was permitted to fish in this area per evening, so there shouldn't be anyone else here. No one in the village had ever broken the rules around night fishing before.

"It's there, and there," the old man's grandson said, pointing to the other side of the river and into the grasslands beyond it.

The old man frowned when he looked out at the grass. There really was light coming from that direction. There were many points of light, small and faint but definitely there. One of the points of light danced

and flashed, then split in two before his very eyes. The light kept splitting into pieces: two, three, four...the longer he looked, the more points of light there were. He felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

The tiny points of light kept splitting; the old man thought they looked a little like a mosquito swarm. They gathered into a huge cluster and rose toward the sky.

The old man heard a sound like the whispering of many insects' wings. He and his grandson watched in stunned silence as the lights rose up and flew directly toward them like a huge school of fish swimming through the dark blue of the night sky.

The old man heard the shouts of the torchbearers on the river getting closer. He returned to his senses and called out, "Run! Get out of the water! There are strange lights over there, coming this way!"

But the men's voices were so loud that his own couldn't be heard through the din.

The old man set down his grandson and threw stones at his son's boat. Every stone hit its target and bounced off the side of his son's boat into the river. When his son looked in his direction, the old man called out, "Get away! There are weird lights over there!"

But it was too late for his son or the other fishermen to do anything; the lights were almost right on top of them. The old man's son looked at him dubiously, as did some of the other fishermen. The old man and his grandson could see the mysterious lights, but his son and the other fishermen couldn't. The fishermen felt that the air was slightly warmer than it had been previously, but they could perceive nothing else.

Suddenly, the smell of the smoke from the pine torches changed to something distinctly oily and fishy. The old man forgot to breathe; the sight before him was terrifying. His son and the members of his family were caught—stuck inside the huge swarm of lights. But his family did nothing but look at him as if he was crazy.

The lights kept coming; they were close to the old man himself now. He picked up his grandson with trembling hands and ran off, away from

where the lights seemed to be headed. After running a short distance, he glanced over his shoulder and saw that the river and grasslands were bright with tiny dancing lights.

When the old man reached the edge of a nearby forest, he heard the buzzing of insects' wings again: hundreds or thousands of them. Fish that didn't usually appear at night jumped out of the river and onto the forest floor as if they'd gone mad. The fish were trying to eat the tiny points of light; the lights reacted as a group and flew high above the river in the forest's trees.

Finally, the points of light stopped moving. They hovered above the site of a recent landslide, then formed a spiral shape and dove into the muddy ground with great speed. All of the lights vanished when they hit the ground. The old man and his grandson stood very still and watched the lights flicker out.

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Warm summer sun fell over Tanda's shoulders. The aftermath of a landslide was reflected in the surface of a clear mountain stream. Tanda saw uprooted grass and dead vegetation mixed in with mud.

Tanda faced the old man standing behind him. The man was influential in his fishing village and had been chosen to speak for them. He claimed that he'd seen a huge number of bright lights moving through the night sky toward the site of the landslide.

"So you saw the strange lights somewhere around here?" Tanda asked.

The old man nodded and tracked the line of the landslide along the edge of the river with his finger. "They came from the direction of the forest. They moved like a school of buyo fish, only they flew through the air instead of swimming through the water. The fish and the birds both tried to eat them as they flew past."

The old man folded his arms. "Doesn't all of that sound strange? It was like I was seeing a river that I never knew existed, only the river

was in the air and birds flew through it to eat the fish."

"Hm. I see." Tanda closed his eyes and readied a spell. He went over the words of it in his mind and gathered his concentration. When he finished the spell, he saw Nayugu behind his closed eyelids. It was underwater in Nayugu here, but Tanda still felt the solid ground of Sagu beneath his feet.

Tanda opened his eyes and took a deep breath. He was sweating from the heat. He sank deeply into thought for a moment, then lifted his head and caught sight of a figure crouching down near the edge of the area damaged by the landslide.

"Master?" Tanda asked.

The ground beneath Torogai's feet began to buckle. She leaped to safety as nimbly as a monkey, but the ground kept collapsing under her. Tanda rushed forward and caught her with his right hand before she could fall.

Torogai was a remarkably ugly old woman. Her skin was dark and her face was wrinkled as finely as a spider's web. She was the greatest magic weaver of the age.

"What are you doing here, Master?" Tanda asked. "It's dangerous!"

Torogai slapped away Tanda's hand. "It wouldn't have collapsed like that if you hadn't shouted like a clumsy oaf."

"Huh?"

Torogai placed her hands on her thighs and looked up at Tanda. "My legs hurt. You're going to carry me home."

Tanda lifted an eyebrow, then sighed. "All right. But why are you here, anyway? What are you looking for?"

Torogai snorted dismissively. "First, tell me what you've learned."

Tanda schooled his expression to seriousness and said, "This place is significantly warmer than the surrounding area. I have the sense of moving around in hot water. I think that Nayugu and this place are closely connected."

Tanda wiped sweat from his forehead "When I was last here, I observed a ravine or a gorge in Nayugu, but now it's completely full of water." Tanda swept his hands out wide, encompassing all of the

damage caused by the landslide. "But even within all that water, there's a hotter spot than the rest, like an energy source. I think that place is what's making the rest of the water warmer."

Torogai nodded to him, then faced the old fisherman from the village. "I don't think those lights you saw are anything to worry about," she said. "Sometimes fish from Nayugu are visible on this side, too, though I'm not entirely sure why. Some of our birds and fish can see the ones that glow in the dark in Nayugu, which is why you saw so many of those lights being eaten, I think."

Tanda rested his chin in his hand. "It is strange that birds from Sagu would be eating fish from Nayugu, isn't it?"

"We can figure that out later," Torogai said. "Right now, we have bigger problems."

Torogai held up her right hand. There was a large beetle in the middle of her palm with wicked-looking black pincers. "Do you know what this is?" Torogai asked, showing the beetle to the fisherman.

Tanda took a closer look at the beetle as well. It was fully armored all over its body and about the size of Torogai's thumb. Its pincers were large and sharp like shears. The beetle's back was covered in mud; its pincers moved sluggishly as if it were tired.

"These are called cut-beetles," Torogai said. "They cut and eat the roots of plants—they especially like eating tree roots. Anyway, they're pests, but I've only rarely seen them before. And I've never seen them at all in the autumn until now."

"So their population is larger in summer?" Tanda asked. "Is that when they usually come out?"

"As to that, I'm not sure," Torogai said. "My father harvested wood from aromatic trees. He told me that he saw these bugs most often in summer. They're called cho."

"I've also seen cho from time to time," the old fisherman said. "They're a favorite food of the oshoro, a migratory bird. I've seen them eating a lot of cho eggs in spring; the cho lay their eggs along the line of the river."

He paused, then continued, "Oh! I just remembered that I didn't see any oshoro at all this year. It's been unusually hot all over—maybe they flew off in winter and never came back in the spring."

Torogai looked down at the cho in her hands and frowned. "There's a swarm of these around here."

Tanda looked at Torogai in surprise. "Maybe they caused the landslide?"

Torogai tilted her head to one side. "Not on their own," she said. "There were a lot of rakkaral off the coast this summer." Rakkaral were huge windstorms capable of sinking ships; having one touch down on land was rare, but it sometimes happened at the end of summer. "We've also had an unusual amount of rain. All of that softens the ground—but the cho do, too."

Torogai looked down and thought in silence for a while. She looked at the old fisherman and said, "The lights you saw weren't evil spirits. Don't worry about that."

The fisherman took a bundle of dried fish from his belt and offered it to Torogai. "Forgive me. I can't offer anything else for your help, but please accept this as a sign of the village's thanks."

"Nah, three fish is all I need." Torogai removed three fish from the bundle and handed four fish back to the fisherman. "Besides, I want to ask you something."

The old man's face expression was difficult to interpret. "What would you like to ask?"

"You lead all the men in your village, right? I want you to ask around and figure out if anyone else saw what you saw. I want to hear all of their accounts, if possible."

The old fisherman nodded. "I'll gather all the witnesses I can. That should be easy enough. Thank you."

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Torogai and Tanda said their farewells to the fisherman and started walking home.

"Are you worried about the landslide, Master Torogai?" Tanda asked.

"What do you think?" Torogai asked.

"I think that because it's spring in Nayugu, the water level has suddenly increased all over. Even places that never felt the influence of Nayugu before are feeling it now. The weather pattern has changed in Sagu—birds that usually fly away in winter and back in the spring are so confused by the warm weather that they never came back. They didn't eat any of the cho eggs this year, so the population of cho is much larger than usual."

Torogai nodded. "And all of this is happening in just a single place that we know about. Think about what might be happening elsewhere."

Tanda faced Torogai. "We could let the heads of each village know about the landslide. They need to work on leveling the ground near the river to prevent more landslides."

Torogai shook her head. "The village leaders have their hands full with imperial recruiters already."

About a year and a half before, the Talsh empire and Sangal had joined forces and declared war on New Yogo. Every man from the age of fifteen to the age of fifty was conscripted into New Yogo's army. Conscripted men left their homes to protect the capital and build fortifications around it. None had returned home since New Yogo started preparing for war.

Men between the ages of sixteen and forty drew lots and got sent out as recruiters for more men. Fear spread in the villages that all their young men would be taken away; no one knew who would be conscripted next.

So there was no one left to spare to level the ground after a landslide.

"Shuga's in a difficult position, too," Torogai muttered. "He's in the thick of it in the capital."

Tanda nodded. He frowned as if something pained him. He was worried about Shuga, but he was even more troubled about what had happened to Chagum.

Torogai took in Tanda's expression and snapped her mouth shut. She increased her walking pace and pulled ahead of him, looking straight ahead as she descended the mountain path. She didn't turn to look at Tanda once.

Tanda stared at Torogai's back as they traveled down the mountain. Tanda's memories made his heart feel like it was being squeezed. Torogai probably felt the same. She never talked about Chagum anymore.

Tanda thought about Chagum all the way home. When he and Torogai approached their hut from the rear, Tanda stopped and crouched down. There were footprints and other signs of people.

At first, Tanda thought that Balsa must have come back, but the man he saw standing to the right side of the garden was a stranger. He had a large build and looked like a hunter or a trapper.

Torogai frowned when she realized that she and Tanda had a visitor. She entered through the hut's back door to avoid the man.

Tanda approached the visitor and waited for him to state his business.

"Excuse me, are you Tanda?" the man asked.

"Yes."

The man's expression instantly transformed into one of relief. "Thank goodness. I hate to cut right to the point, but I've been looking all over for you. I need to find someone named Balsa..."

Part 1 - Searching for Chagum

Chapter 1 - Over the Mountains

The light of the late evening filtered through the leaves overhead. It would soon be too dark for Balsa to see her own feet moving through the dense underbrush.

Balsa wiped the sweat from her forehead and checked the orientation of the narrow forest path in front of her. She was used to walking in the mountains and she'd been here before, but the vegetation was so thick that it nearly choked out the path. The way forward was getting harder and harder to make out.

Autumn came late this year. Most of the time the trees would have already lost most of their leaves by now, but everything was still lush and green.

Balsa heard branches snapping behind her. Someone called out to her in a quiet voice. It was a merchant, Sain; he'd gotten his legs stuck in the tall grass. Sain's wife Toki tried to pull him loose, but he stayed stuck, even after their daughter tried to help.

Balsa backtracked and grabbed Sain's arm. She yanked forward and pulled him loose.

"Thank you," Sain said. "Sorry I got stuck."

Sain was a slightly overweight man who sweated a lot in the unseasonable heat. He settled his pack more comfortably over his shoulders and took a few deep breaths. "We can't even see the path," he said. "We should probably find somewhere to stop for the night."

Balsa hushed Sain and whispered, "Do you hear that?"

Sain suddenly appeared frightened. "Hear what?"

"The river," Balsa whispered.

Sain, Toki and their daughter Rai all stood still and strained their ears to listen.

"Ah," Sain said, nodding. "This slope must go down to the river. It's high enough to give a good view of the surrounding area, so there may be soldiers and patrols around. I hoped we'd slip past them in the dark." He squinted his eyes. "Maybe we should wait until nightfall. They won't see us then."

Balsa shook her head. "If we wait for it to be completely dark, we don't be able to see anything, either."

Sain's face fell. He turned toward his six-year-old daughter. She also seemed disappointed and a little scared, so Balsa smiled to reassure her.

"Just hang in there a little longer, Rai," she said. "You'll be home the day after tomorrow."

Rai nodded.

Balsa faced Sain and Toki and said calmly, "Focus. No one can get stuck in the underbrush while we're traveling tonight. It will slow us down, plus we risk getting separated. It doesn't matter how slowly we go, but we need to keep moving and do our best not to make a sound. This area is crawling with soldiers."

Sain and Toki nodded in understanding. Balsa turned on her heel and kept walking down the forest path. Sain, Toki and Rai followed her, lifting their feet high so that they wouldn't get caught or fall in the tall grass.

Sain muttered complaints as he walked. "What are we doing, sneaking back home in the dark like a bunch of thieves? I can't believe we have to do this just to avoid the soldiers."

He'd said almost the same thing at the start of their journey, when Balsa had first escorted him and his family through the mountains in Rota. He hadn't complained at all since that time, but now the frustration seemed to be getting to him again.

Balsa faced Sain and put her finger to her lips to remind him to be silent. He frowned at her, nodded sulkily and stopped muttering. Balsa kept searching for the edges of the path in the growing darkness. She understood exactly how Sain felt.

The Mikado's proclamations to recruit men for the army had started almost a year before. More proclamations were declared every week, though every village was already suffering. The reason given for the proclamations was that the Mikado needed to protect the nation from a corrupt and impure enemy. All the people of New Yogo were expected to do their part in service to the Mikado.

The entire country had been preparing for war since the first Talsh ambassadors had arrived and given their terms to the Mikado. New Yogo closed all its borders, not just with Sangal, but with Rota and Kanbal as well. People who tried to leave or come in over the border were treated as spies and executed.

Among the people who suffered the most from this policy were poor merchants and workers from Kanbal who often came to New Yogo to sell their wares and work. Kanbalese and Rotan merchants and laborers who were already in New Yogo were not permitted to go home; Yogoese citizens who were abroad at the time of the border closure weren't permitted to return to their home nation, either.

Balsa had been in New Yogo when the borders were closed. She'd spent months guiding Rotan and Yogoese merchants over the mountains back to their homes, avoiding all the border patrols. She knew many ways through the mountains that were otherwise known only to beasts and a few hunters, but not every way she knew could be used. There were paths so steep and narrow that Sain and his family would never be able to navigate them. Crossing the mountains was always difficult and at least a little dangerous.

Despite this, many people were willing to cross them so that they could go home. Sain and Toki had left their younger daughter, who was four, in the care of her grandparents in New Yogo while they'd traveled to Rota with Rai. They were willing to give up almost anything to return to their family now.

Balsa wasn't the only person helping people cross the mountains. The knowledge that there were ways to avoid the border guards was common enough that the Mikado had stationed guards on the largest

and most-well known of the mountain roads. Balsa's work as a guard and guide restricted her to an astonishingly small number of safe paths.

It's no use thinking about how hard this is getting. I need a distraction, Balsa thought as she moved silently down the path. She was glad that she could still work. Work was good; it helped her keep her mind off Chagum. She had heard in Rota that he was dead.

Balsa shook her head to banish her negative thoughts. She needed to focus on guarding Sain and his family through the mountains. The whispering sound of the river gradually became a roar as Balsa descended closer to the riverbed. She gestured for Sain and his family to wait, then crouched down. She leaned her spear against the trunk of a tree and sprinted down the path out of sight. She moved with the silence and speed of a fox: no one could hear her moving, and after a few steps, Sain and his family couldn't see her, either.

Sain and Toki exchanged surprised glances. "How can she move like that?" Sain muttered. When he'd first heard that someone was guiding people over the border, he'd expected that person to be a middle-aged warrior, big and strong, not this relatively young and slightly built woman. She was in her mid-thirties and wore her black hair tied at the nape of her neck in a simple style. Her skin was deeply tanned and she was very tall—not just for a woman. The shaft of her short spear was as black as ebony from long years of use.

Sain had worried about entrusting his family's lives to her at first, but the other bodyguards and guides that he'd met had given him a peculiar feeling, and all those bodyguards and guides had clearly respected Balsa. That had done more to prove her stellar reputation than anything she could have said.

"Sain," Balsa whispered.

Sain jumped up in shock. He'd been lost in thought and hadn't noticed Balsa's return. Rai had fallen asleep in her mother's arms, but now she jerked awake. The shape of the mountain before them loomed large, but nothing else was visible in the darkness. Even Balsa's face was lost to the shadows.

"It's like we thought," Balsa said. "There are soldiers here."

Toki and Sain reached for one another's hands.

"It's all right," Balsa said softly. "There are only three. I've seen no others camped around here. I can fight three without much of a problem, but breaking past them without being seen is probably impossible."

Balsa looked at Sain and Toki. "So what do you want to do? Should we turn back? Or keep going and risk being seen?"

Sain, Toki and Rai were risking their lives to return to a homeland that might be attacked and destroyed by the Talsh empire at any time. Toki took a step forward and said, "We'll keep going."

Sain thought about his aged parents, then nodded. "Yes. We've come this far. We have to make it home." He reached out and grabbed Balsa's arm. "If—if we can't make it through for any reason, please save our daughter." His hands were shaking.

Balsa placed one hand over Sain's and said, "I promise I will."

She explained what they all had to do in a calm, easy-to-understand way. "Follow me to the riverbed, and stay close—close enough to touch my shoulder. The place I'm leading you is a small distance away from the soldiers' camp, but still close enough that they may discover us. There are trees lining the riverbed, so be sure to hide behind them and use them for cover."

After Sain and Toki nodded, Balsa continued, "I'll carry Rai on my back and cross the river. I'll leave the rope with you to tie on your side; I'll tie my end to a tree on the other side of the river."

She paused, then said, "I'll create a distraction for any soldiers. While I'm drawing their attention, use the rope to cross the river. It isn't deep, but the current is very strong. Don't let go of the rope no matter what. If you do, you'll drown."

Balsa lowered her voice. "I want you to focus on crossing that river. Nothing else. Once you're across the river, wait for me in the forest."

Sain and Toki nodded again.

Balsa stood up and said, "All right. Let's go."

***

Shadows danced in the light of an open fire. Freshly caught fish were impaled on wooden skewers, ready to be roasted by the soldiers who had caught them. The forest and the sky almost looked the same in the gloom. Two soldiers stood on the mountain path that descended to the riverbank, but they were difficult to make out since they were standing so far from the fire. A third soldier stood near the fire, eating.

The changing of the guard occurred every two days. There was nothing for the soldiers to do but wait until then.

The two men stationed on the path started coming closer to the fire to eat their dinner when they heard a cry that sounded like a child in distress. The soldier nearest the fire felt a slight twinge of panic—what if it was a spirit, or a monster in the woods? But he soon calmed himself and reasoned that it was probably just another person trying to cross the border.

He stood up to check on his fellow soldiers and heard a strange whistling sound behind him. The soldier fell to the ground and groaned; he'd been shoved so hard from behind that he'd fallen, but he didn't think that anything was broken. He tried to stand and signal the others on duty that something was wrong, but the best he could do was struggle to his knees.

The shadow moving in front of him didn't belong to any of his fellow soldiers. He stood up slowly, rubbing his shoulder and gritting his teeth. His head spun, but he lurched into motion and followed the figure toward the river.

When he saw the other two soldiers on duty challenging the mysterious figure, he let out a sigh of relief. They were excellent swordsmen of the sagi discipline; their swords flashed in the low light provided by the moons and the distant fire.

Everything's fine. They can fight off just one person without any problems.

The soldier was still relatively far from the fighting when he stopped in place. Stepping in to assist his comrades might prove distracting. The figure they were fighting was smaller and slighter than they'd seemed at first glance; he saw the shadow of their short spear sweeping up to block a sword strike.

He heard the sound of metal striking metal. The spear and the sword crossed in midair; the spear wielder brought their weapon down low, then quickly swept it up again as the sword struck down. Sparks flew as the spear and sword connected once more.

The spear wielder suddenly had only one opponent. The soldier didn't see the other swordsman moving at all.

The spear's tip flicked into the remaining swordsman's side with a fast, smooth, whip-like motion. He collapsed to the ground, leaving the spear wielder standing. The soldier heard labored breathing as he struggled to remain conscious.

As the sounds of the fighting faded, the soldier realized that he could hear something else: the sound of people crossing the river. He also heard a child cry out again.

The soldier clutched his injured shoulder and shook. The spear wielder was headed straight toward him. The moment he caught sight of the spear wielder's face in the gloom, he felt a sharp blow to his gut that doubled him over.

He never identified the spear wielder. He sucked in a few painful breaths, collapsed to his knees and passed out.

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Balsa knelt down next to the soldier she'd just knocked out and pushed his mouth open with one hand. He looked like a boy. She laid him out flat and made sure he wouldn't bite or swallow his tongue. Then she stood up and walked upstream.

Rai was generally a well-behaved child, but crossing the river without her parents had caused her to cry out in helplessness. And when Balsa had left her alone to go back for her parents, she had cried out again. Thanks to that, her parents were able to find her quickly, though she had also drawn the notice of the soldiers.

Balsa saw Sain, Toki and Rai huddled under the roots of a large tree and waved. They had all made it.

Chapter 2 - A Letter from Jin

That night, Balsa, Sain and his family camped in the shadow of a large boulder. Building a fire so close to the soldiers' camp had risks, but Balsa decided it was best to make a small one so that Sain and his family could dry their clothes and have a hot meal. Fear made Sain and Toki's stomachs turn, but they knew they needed to eat to keep their strength up. They'd never be able to cross the mountains if they were starving.

Balsa mixed honey into a warm wheat gruel and passed it around. Sain and his family quickly fell asleep after they ate. Balsa put out the fire. Stars twinkled in the sky between the tree branches above. Balsa leaned against the boulder at her back and looked up.

Chagum is dead.

The Mikado had given him an extravagant funeral. He'd proclaimed that the Crown Prince had returned to Ten no Kami and the gods to become a protector of his nation in death.

The person Balsa had heard all this from had snorted in derision at this point. "Likely story. Haven't you heard?" the woman had said. "The rakkaral and summer storms were all much worse than usual this year. At the start of the year, these storms were taken as an ill omen—perhaps a premonition of the Crown Prince's death? But the poor weather continues."

Balsa had listened to the woman without saying a word.

There were rumors that everything terrible that had happened over the past year was due to Crown Prince Chagum's death. Balsa had also heard rumors that the Crown Prince was captured in Sangal and negotiated his own release, but committed suicide or was otherwise killed on the way home.

The Mikado made no effort to quash any of these rumors. The most important thing to him was that Crown Prince Chagum was dead.

Chagum wouldn't kill himself, Balsa thought. She remembered Chagum as he'd been years and years ago, fleeing the palace with clenched fists and tears streaming down his face. He'd only been eleven at the time, but he'd had tremendous strength of will even then. He would never use suicide to escape his problems.

He was probably killed, then.

That's how things seemed to her. If Chagum was dead, it was because someone else had murdered him. No body had been returned to Kosenkyo for the funeral; perhaps rumors of his suicide had spread so far because his body had been lost at sea. Perhaps some of the rumors were true: maybe Sangal had tried to get him to betray his country. He was such a responsible and honest person; he might choose death over betraying his people and his own integrity.

Whether Chagum killed himself or not, his end was untimely—and devastating.

Balsa closed her eyes. *Chagum is no longer in this world.* Thinking about Chagum, so bright and full of life as he'd been, having his life so suddenly cut short turned her guts to water. *At least he died outside, and not in that terrible palace.*

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Balsa heard a twig snap from somewhere behind her. She opened her eyes, grabbed her spear and stood up. Someone was coming closer. They were carrying a lantern, but it was small; she couldn't make out very much of the person's face or form. She approached the figure with her spear in front of her as a clear warning and didn't make a sound.

"I'm sorry if I startled you," a voice said out of the dark. "I don't mean you any harm. I hunt deer, but I'm short on salt licks and was headed home when I saw your fire. May I approach?"

Toki awoke and sat up. Balsa retreated a few steps and crouched down next to her. She whispered, "Wake Sain and Rai. Get ready to run at any time. He claims to be a hunter who's run out of salt licks, but I

don't buy his story. Take everyone behind the boulder. If I shout for you to run, run. Understand?"

Toki nodded.

Balsa stood up and faced the man claiming to be a hunter. "If it's salt you need, we can share some. I'll bring some to you. Stay there."

Balsa could see well in the dark. She walked toward the man and squinted, trying to make out the man's features. He didn't really look like a hunter. He didn't have a bow, arrows, rope or any of the tools she'd expect a deer hunter to use. This area also didn't have much game; there was no good reason for a hunter to be wandering around here at night.

When Balsa stepped into his light, the man gasped. "Are you—excuse me, but are you Balsa? Balsa the spear wielder?"

Balsa's eyebrows drew together. She didn't remember ever meeting this man before, but he was clearly interested in finding her and must have gotten her description from someone.

"You're her, aren't you?" the man asked. "I've been looking all over for you."

Balsa shushed the man. "Keep your voice down."

The man nodded. When he spoke again, his voice was softer and quieter. "I'm sorry. I'm just so relieved that I finally found you. My name is Oru. A man named Tanda told me that you might be somewhere in these mountains, so I've been searching for days."

Balsa was still frowning when she said, "Well, now you've found me. What do you want?"

"I'm a high-ranking sailor in New Yogo's navy," he said. "If you truly are Balsa, then I have something for you. But I can't just hand it over without verifying your identity. When you were about to start your journey with Crown Prince Chagum, who did you send in your place to buy supplies?"

"Toya," Balsa whispered.

Oru's shoulders relaxed immediately. "Ten no Kami, I offer thanks!" He produced a thick envelope from his breast pocket and handed it to Balsa. "I sailed with Crown Prince Chagum to Sangal and was also taken captive. Crown Prince Chagum freed me and many others. But before we all arrived home, Crown Prince Chagum left the ship in secret with help from lord Amusuran and his servant, Ruin."

Balsa's heart beat faster when she heard Chagum's name. She remembered that Amusuran was the true surname of one of the Mikado's Hunters, Jin. Had Jin sent her this message? Why?

She wanted to hear everything Oru had to say immediately, but Sain and his family were waiting for her behind the boulder. "I'd love to discuss all this in more detail, but I have something to take care of first. Can you wait a moment? I'll be right back."

When Oru nodded, Balsa went to tell Sain and his family that there was no danger and that they could come back to the camp and sleep. Sain, Toki and Rai all expressed open relief as they returned to the smoking embers of the fire and lay back down for more rest.

Balsa returned to Oru and whispered, "Thank you. We can talk more now. Please continue your message."

Apparently, Oru, Jin and Chagum's servant Ruin had all worked together to arrange Chagum's escape from the ship that had been bringing him home from Sangal.

"I also helped lord Amusuran when Crown Prince Chagum tried to escape from the prisoners' hut in Sangal, so lord Amusuran took me into his confidence," Oru said. "When the ship was close to the Sangal peninsula, the eyes of our watchers became difficult to avoid, so lord Amusuran passed several messages to me and helped me leave the ship without being seen. He ordered me to find you and deliver this message no matter what."

The envelope that Oru had given Balsa was slightly wet and wrinkled at the edges, but still largely intact.

"He also told me to ask that question to verify your identity and gave me a list of places where you might be found. I went to Tanda the

herbalist's hut first and he made me a map of the paths you might be traveling through the mountains. But you move like a cloud—you're never in the same place for long."

Balsa nodded absentmindedly at Oru, then opened the envelope. Jin's letter was brief, but it had a powerful effect on Balsa's heart and mind. The first few lines made her smile, but by the time she reached the end, she was frowning. She stared at the letter for a long time after she finished reading it. Oru thought she looked a bit uncertain, or maybe even a little afraid.

Three gold coins were enclosed along with the letter. Balsa clasped them tightly in one fist.

"It seems you understand the situation," Oru whispered.

Balsa lifted her eyes from the letter, then nodded.

"Please hurry to Rota as fast as you can," Oru said.

Balsa shook her head. "I am definitely headed for Rota, but I have to make sure this family gets home first."

The skin under Oru's beard turned red from rage. "What?! You would prioritize commoners over such an important task?"

"I can't just quit in the middle of a job," Balsa said quietly.

Oru felt nothing but cold rage. Before he could do anything, he heard Balsa's spear point cut the air and felt it rest lightly along the edge of his neck.

"What do you intend to do?" Balsa asked in a muffled voice.

Oru looked into Balsa's eyes and remained silent; her eyes looked as sharp and cold as her blade. He took a few careful, shallow breaths and said, "Let me take that family back home for you. That way you can head to Rota right away."

Balsa removed her spear point from Oru's neck. "I can't do that. I have no doubt that you're a brave warrior, but I'm not sure how well you can hide yourself and others in these mountains. I can't just entrust this family to you."

Balsa placed the three coins from Jin's letter into her breast pocket, then sheathed her spear. "If I wrote you a reply, would you deliver it to lord Amusuran?" she asked.

Oru wiped cold sweat from his forehead with the palm of his hand, then nodded reluctantly. "Yes, I'll deliver your reply. I have paper and writing tools if you need them."

Balsa accepted paper, ink and a brush pen from Oru, then wrote a reply. It was hard to suppress her own impatience and anxiety. She couldn't just abandon Sain and his family, but she wanted to go to Rota as soon as possible. Chagum was there. She had to look for him.

This is impossible. How did he do it? Did he jump from a boat at night and swim all the way to Rota? He apparently had treasure given to him by Sangal's royal family, but that would likely be stolen by the first people he met.

She took a deep breath to still her hands and continued writing her letter. Remembering the last words Jin had written made her heart beat faster with worry and anxiety.

There's probably not much hope of saving Crown Prince Chagum at this point. Not many people believe in him anymore; most people think he's dead. If his enemies know he's alive, I'm sure they're after him. Crown Prince Chagum didn't want anyone to know he was alive—not the Talsh, and not our own people. If the Talsh knew his plans, they would certainly try to stop him. The only one who can move freely here is you, Balsa. If Crown Prince Chagum still lives, please protect him.

Balsa removed her brush pen from the paper and waited for the ink on her own letter to dry. *I promise I'll find him—even if he's dead.*

She accepted a small lump of wax from Oru and melted it slightly with the flame of his lantern. Then she rolled up and sealed the letter.

"Only deliver this to lord Amusuran," she said. "You can't let this fall into the wrong hands."

Oru nodded and tucked her letter into his pocket. A shiver went up his spine.

"Lord Amusuran and I are of like mind in this," Balsa said. "If he can be saved, I'll save him."

Oru's face was bright red. "I would never betray you or lord Amusuran. I expect you to do everything in your power to fulfill your mission."

Balsa nodded.

Oru turned around and started heading down the mountain. Balsa stared at his retreating back for a few moments before returning to Sain and his family.

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The next day, Balsa, Sain and his family descended into a gorge. There was a village near the river at the very bottom. When they had almost reached the village, the weather took a turn for the worse. The sky was thick with clouds and the wind blew in strongly from the south.

Another rakkaral, huh? Balsa thought. At sea, rakkaral caused enormous whirlpools and windstorms, but on land they rampaged over the earth in a vortex of wind and rain.

Sain's village was at least a day away in decent weather. The nearby village was called Maru; Balsa had promised to get Sain and his family to Tanoru.

Rain fell in sheets as Balsa and her charges entered Maru. She decided to stay at the village's inn to wait out the storm.

The howling of the wind and rain was clearly audible even inside the inn. "It's looking pretty rough out there," the inn's proprietor said kindly. "I'll bring some water for you to freshen up. It's been so hot."

Sain and his family nodded gratefully and sat down near the inn's door. Sain looked up at Balsa and said, "You got us here; it's all right if you need to leave." When he smiled at her, she smiled back. It was the first time she'd ever seen Sain smile.

Sain stood up and bowed to Balsa. "You saved us. I'll never forget it." He removed the rest of Balsa's payment from his pocket and passed it to her.

Balsa nodded in thanks, then turned toward the inn's proprietor. "Hm...forgive me for being so abrupt, but I need a few things. I'd like to eat as soon as possible. Then I need some new straw sandals and rain gear. I want to be on my way in an hour."

The inn's proprietor appeared stunned. "What? You intend to go back out in that storm?"

Balsa nodded. She removed her sodden sandals, then sat down near Sain and his family. "I'll rest a little and get cleaned up, but then I have to be on my way."

Sain and Toki both looked worriedly at Balsa. The wind was getting louder; they could hear it cutting through the bamboo trees in the forest outside.

"Balsa, you can't go outside when it's like this," Sain said. "You didn't sleep at all last night, and our journey has been long and tiring. You must be exhausted. You should rest and wait for the storm to blow over."

Balsa smiled a little. "Thanks for your concern, but I'll be fine. Really. I'm used to traveling in all kinds of weather."

A man carrying hot water for the inn's guests entered the room. Balsa stood up and approached him. Sain and Toki still looked at her with worried expressions, but didn't say anything else.

Chapter 3 - The Mikado's Dignity

Shuga jolted awake.

He'd been having a nightmare, so at first he had no idea where he was. He stared into the darkness and breathed to calm himself down. He was in his own room in the Star Palace, lying down.

There was someone crouched down at the end of his futon. Shuga sat up hurriedly. The early light of dawn made all the shadows in the room look faintly blue; he couldn't identify the figure at all.

The figure put a finger to their lips and said, "Sh. It's just me."

Shuga's shoulders relaxed. "Jin? Don't scare me like that. I thought you were here to kill me." He pushed aside his blankets and looked at Jin. "But you didn't kill me in my sleep, so why are you here?"

Jin smiled slightly. "Yeah, I could have easily killed you in your sleep—but the threat of other assassins is fairly low." He wasn't smiling anymore. "If I were you, I'd be more concerned about poison."

Shuga grimaced. "You're probably right. I've been trying to keep my head down, but I'm sure there are some people out there who want to harm me."

A messenger from the Talsh empire had arrived in New Yogo shortly after Jin's return from Sangal. Jin had reported that Crown Prince Chagum was dead—and now, the Talsh empire was coming to invade New Yogo. The Talsh had demanded a response from the Mikado by the evening of midsummer. He could either submit to Talsh rule or have his nation be utterly destroyed.

The deadline was Talsh's midsummer day, not New Yogo's, which was already past. Talsh midsummer corresponded to the twelfth day of New Yogo's spring, only a few weeks after the winter snow melted.

In the roughly half a year that Talsh waited for an answer, no ships landed on Nayoro peninsula. Talsh already had a foothold in Sangal, the

seafaring nation to the south. Asking Sangal for help was out of the question, even though New Yogo and Sangal had been allies for a very long time. All New Yogo could expect from Sangal now was betrayal.

Ultimately, the decision of how to react to the threat of Talsh invasion fell to three people: the Mikado, the Holy Sage's primary disciple, Gakai, and the new Crown Prince's grandfather, Army General Radou.

After Crown Prince Chagum was declared dead, the Mikado had a grand state funeral for him, then immediately designated Tugum, his younger son, as the new Crown Prince. General Radou was proud of his new position and extremely pompous about it.

The Mikado, Gakai and Army General Radou held many meetings and secret conferences inside the imperial palace. Meetings with other government officials were also held, of course, but those were a mere formality; all the actual decision-making regarding Talsh fell to these three men.

As the threat of invasion loomed ever closer, the spirit of the nation started to resemble an out-of-control horse darting around in random directions. Perhaps the Holy Sage could have taken matters into his own hands and quelled the chaos, but he had collapsed in the spring of this year and still wasn't able to leave his sickchamber. He mostly just slept and tried to recover his strength.

When news of Crown Prince Chagum's death reached the palace, the faction that had supported him at court collapsed almost immediately. The shock of his sudden death when he'd been so young and in such excellent health stunned his former supporters into wary silence. The Holy Sage had not yet transferred the responsibilities of his office to anyone, but Gakai operated as the new Holy Sage in fact if not in name.

The result was that Shuga, who was also a candidate to become the next Holy Sage, was excluded from all important meetings regarding the Talsh threat. He didn't have the will or the heart to challenge Gakai for his place.

"Keeping your head down is a wise idea, but if you stay cooped up in here forever, people might assume you're dead already," Jin said.

Shuga smiled. "I'm not dead, just thinking. The only good thing about the current situation is that I've got lots and lots of time to think." He tilted his head and said, "You didn't answer my original question. Why bother to sneak in here and talk to me? There must be a reason."

"Of course there is. I have news."

Shuga's face lit up. "Did your messenger find Balsa?"

Jin smiled. "Yeah. She put her spear to his throat. I doubt he'll forget that in a hurry."

Shuga chuckled. He and Jin sat in silence in the predawn gloom for a while. "You're in a weird mood," Shuga said.

Jin had successfully assassinated Crown Prince Chagum a year and a half ago—at least, that was the official story. As a reward for his achievements, the Mikado had promoted Jin, making him the leader of the Hunters over Mon, whose health was beginning to deteriorate. Jin had sent a messenger to Rota in secret to seek out Balsa in the hope that she might find Crown Prince Chagum and save him. However, if she was successful, then Crown Prince Chagum would return safely to his homeland, and the Mikado would know that Jin had lied.

Jin's eyebrows lifted slightly. "Why shouldn't I be? The Talsh are coming, and they're famous for killing men, women and children without mercy. If the Talsh really do invade, I'll almost certainly die in battle."

Shuga stared fixedly at Jin. His typically nondescript appearance concealed an unusually courageous spirit.

"I'm trying to think of a way for that not to happen," Shuga said. He put his face in his hands. "Have you discovered who the traitor in the palace is yet?"

Jin shook his head. "No, not yet."

"We have to find out who that is," Shuga said. "Once we know, we can figure out how to counter them."

Jin nodded. "I'll do everything I can."

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When Jin left, he did so silently and without announcing it. Shuga stared at the dark walls of his room, all alone. Crown Prince Chagum had sent everything he knew about the Talsh invasion plan to Shuga in a letter before fleeing to Rota. The plan was all laid out simply and clearly, but it shocked Shuga to the core of himself. A sixteen-year-old should never have been able to write and send such a letter and then vanish as Chagum had done.

Thinking about what Chagum must have gone through during the long months he'd spent among his enemies was difficult for Shuga. His life hadn't been easy before that: he'd had the fate of New Yogo and all its people on his shoulders since he was eleven years old. Shuga wanted him to be able to come home, back to the palace; he missed him. But when he thought about the current situation with Talsh, he also wanted Chagum to remain safe and far away until the danger was past.

The nation seemed to be running straight toward its own annihilation. New Yogo couldn't possibly hope to defeat the Talsh empire in war. Facing the Talsh in open combat would result in nothing but death and the destruction of the land. There were only two ways to avoid that outcome.

The first would be for the Mikado to capitulate to the Talsh. It was obvious that New Yogo couldn't win a war; bowing out and saving lives before the fighting started would be a logical solution. And surrendering without a fight would put the nation in a better position to negotiate fair treatment.

The second way would be for Crown Prince Chagum to succeed in his plan. He wanted to forge an alliance between New Yogo, Kanbal and Rota so that the three nations could beat back the Talsh together. Chagum had proposed just such an alliance to the Mikado before being sent to Sangal. Remembering the rage in the Mikado's eyes when Chagum had brought forward his proposal made Shuga flinch.

Chagum knew that his plan was reckless and irresponsible, but he also felt that he had no other choice. The world was intolerably cruel for pushing him onto such a path, but that had always been true to a certain extent. Chagum had rarely been able to choose freely in his life. If his plan succeeded, he might be able to shift New Yogo onto a new path for the future. Shuga was fairly sure that the King of Rota would agree to the alliance.

Shuga rubbed his temples. *The Mikado will never request military aid from Rota or Kanbal.* The Mikado was blessed by Ten no Kami, the God of the Heavens; the idea that he would ever ask for help from other nations to protect New Yogo was nothing short of blasphemous. It was unfortunate that this was the case; Rota could mount a huge number of cavalry forces and rush quickly to New Yogo's aid in the event of a war—but only if they were asked for help first. New Yogo and Rota could rebuff the first Talsh attacks, then bring in Kanbal to create a solid wall of resistance against the invasion.

But then, New Yogo would no longer be considered a country protected by the divine power of a god. Being saved or helped by mere humans was beneath the Mikado's dignity, and asking anyone else for help was simply unthinkable.

The Mikado has a keen mind. He should have seen this situation coming and planned accordingly.

But New Yogo had always been relatively isolated from his neighbors. Isolation coupled with the policy that the Mikado should only rely on Ten no Kami and New Yogo's gods would only result in New Yogo's destruction.

Shuga's fingers were shaking. He felt cold.

The Mikado could not be moved to accept a proposal that would save the lives of his people at the expense of his own dignity and pride. The Holy Sage might have been able to create such a proposal and get the Mikado to accept it, but Hibi Tonan was still ill. Without his guidance, the Mikado was leading the nation down the path of ruin.

If only Crown Prince Chagum were here.

Chagum was motivated to save New Yogo's people. If he were in charge, there would be no need to fear that the country would be destroyed.

But it was highly unlikely that Crown Prince Chagum was still alive. It was even more unlikely that he'd return to Kosenkyo in time for any of his actions and opinions to matter. Wishing for him to be here was nothing more than an idle fancy: Chagum wasn't here. Shuga couldn't sit around waiting for him to come back.

There must be a way of reaching the Mikado—a way of peeling back his heavenly facade and appealing to the man underneath.

Hibi Tonan had told him once that the path of the Holy Sage was shrouded in darkness and that it would force him to do reprehensible things for the greater good. When Shuga had been a boy, he'd thought that the Holy Sage was the purest, kindest, most amazing person in the world. The Holy Sage was supposed to guide the Mikado, the child of a god, with the help of the Star Readers who read potential futures for the nation.

Shuga had always believed that Star Readers were supposed to help the Holy Sage and the Mikado create a better future for everyone.

It must be exhausting to be a saint or a sage. No one looks at you as you are. It's like you're too bright for people to see you clearly.

The room was as dark as the bottom of the sea. Shuga stayed seated on his futon and stared into the darkness.

Chapter 4 - The Black Market

A bright light shining from the top of a tall stone tower illuminated the sea below. Balsa stood at the edge of the harbor near a wooden post and stared out at the sea.

Balsa had no love at all for the ocean. She'd been born in the mountains and preferred it there. Looking at the sea made her vaguely uncomfortable: she couldn't see the bottom of it or any edges. It just seemed to go on forever.

You were brave to jump in there, Chagum.

She could imagine why he'd done it: to escape his father's palace, to avoid being tracked by Talsh spies, and to thwart the plans of Talsh itself.

Saving New Yogo from falling into the hands of the Talsh was really the most important thing to him. She wondered if Chagum had hesitated before jumping in. Probably not. His dedication to forging an alliance with Rota surprised her. She never would have guessed just what kind of a person Chagum would become as an adult.

Chagum had never wanted to be the Crown Prince. She remembered him clinging to her and begging to stay with her and Tanda forever.

Balsa closed her eyes.

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It had been fifteen days since Oru delivered Jin's letter. She had made her way back to Rota through the mountains, buying a horse in one of the small towns she passed through. Her immediate goal was to reach Tsuram harbor. Chagum had likely entered Rota from there, but there was no guarantee that he was in or near Tsuram now. Sometimes she felt like she was looking for a needle in a haystack.

Balsa's best clue was the riches that Chagum had acquired from the Sangalese royal family. He'd taken that treasure during his flight and

had no other money, so he'd have to pay for his travel expenses with it. If he'd managed to reach Rota without being robbed, she might be able to use his description and the description of the treasure he had to barter with to find him.

Passage by boat from Sangal to Rota cost three silver coins. She could check at the docks and ask about recent passengers. Balsa considered the idea of Chagum arriving by boat relatively likely. He had jumped off his ship somewhere near the island of Nogura, which was very close to the Sangal peninsula.

Traveling through Sangal would be incredibly risky, which was why Balsa thought Chagum hadn't done it. The border between Sangal and New Yogo had been closed by the time he'd escaped his ship, so there probably wouldn't be many Yogoese merchants or travelers in Sangal. Chagum would stick out like a sore thumb in such an environment.

Yes, traveling to Rota by boat would be far less conspicuous, but also much more dangerous. Chagum was a young foreigner in wartime carrying precious treasure; even normally honest ferrymen might consider him an easy target. And not every merchant or trade ship was actually honest; many engaged in piracy on the side. Chagum's treasure would tempt almost anyone.

Balsa considered it likely that Chagum had been robbed, but she doubted he'd been killed. Theft was common in Sangal, but murder was exceedingly rare. Most people in Sangal didn't think of human life as something that could or should be stolen.

If Chagum had fallen into the hands of pirates, then it was likely that the treasure he'd been carrying had been sold to fencers for Sangal's black market. Money was almost impossible to track, but rare gems and people were not. There was a possibility that the pirates would sell the goods stolen from Chagum in Sangal, but it would be safer to sell them in southern Rota. Gems from the royal family would be much easier to identify in Sangal, and consequently harder to sell in secret.

Jin's thoughts matched Balsa's: he'd provided a detailed description of everything Chagum had been carrying when he'd left the ship,

including his treasure. The most easily traceable item was something called a Talfa necklace. It was patterned like a fish, made of gold and inset with enormous rubies that glowed with a burnished inner light. Its materials alone were so expensive that most Sangalese merchants would never be able to afford one, and even if they could purchase it, they wouldn't be able to wear it. Only royalty and nobility were permitted to wear a Talfa necklace.

Any pirate who acquired the necklace would know immediately that they wouldn't be able to sell it in Sangal. With New Yogo's borders still closed, they would have no choice but to sell it in Rota. But where? There were many small port cities along Rota's southern coast, but merchants in those ports probably lacked sufficient capital to buy something so outrageously expensive. The only merchants who would even consider buying a Talfa necklace would have to have access to nobility or royalty as customers.

Balsa considered Tsuram the easiest place for pirates to sell a Talfa necklace. It was connected to Rota's capital city by the Orra river; food and supplies often passed back and forth between the cities on boats and barges. Tsuram was Rota's largest port; it imported goods from Sangal, the Sugal Sea, the occupied kingdom of Karal and the southern continent, then shipped them all to Rota's royal palace. Almost anything of significant value in Rota would have to pass through Tsuram at some point on its way to its destination.

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Balsa had reached Tsuram harbor some days before. She started by investigating the local slave traders as well as jewelry and gem stores. She heard rumors of a huge trove of stolen goods that had been sold recently. If only she'd gotten here sooner, the information would have been less stale...and possibly less embellished. She asked around all over, but no one seemed to know the details of what had been stolen or who it was sold to. Everyone had a slightly different story to tell.

When she'd exhausted all her legal modes of interrogation, she turned to illegal ones. Every large city had a black market for information as well as stolen goods. She pretended to be on the market for stolen Sangalese treasure and chatted up suspicious-looking characters, keeping close by them and paying for their drinks. She learned a lot of news and gossip, but very little of it was helpful.

Eventually, Balsa's investigation bore fruit: she finally heard a rumor about a Talfa necklace. The brother of the pirate who had sold it had loose lips and was spreading the rumor in all the taverns and bars near the harbor.

Balsa couldn't believe her ears at first—rather, she didn't want to believe them. Chagum had been captured by pirates. The good news was that he was likely to be nearby. This was her first real lead; she genuinely smiled for the first time in weeks.

But she still didn't know where Chagum actually was. She knew who had sold the necklace, but not who it had been sold to. Even among the criminal underclass, there were some people whose information was trustworthy and reliable, but most criminals she encountered were motivated solely by profit. They'd say anything for a few coins. If Balsa really wanted to find out if Chagum had been sold with the necklace, she would have to involve herself with the worst of these greedy criminals.

Balsa had to learn everything she could about the pirate who had sold the Talfa necklace—but she had no friends or connections in Tsuram who could acquire such information for her. She also had no power or authority here; very few people in this city had even heard of her before.

She also had no easy way of gathering the information herself. She would have to accept her lack of background knowledge here as a given—and bluff in order to get what she needed.

Bluffing successfully in front of people with connections to the black market would be difficult; they were all wary and on their guard simply due to their profession.

Still, Balsa was determined to try. She couldn't think of any better options.

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The loud peals of a bell rang out, then faded away. The bell was attached to a cunningly made water clock that used the water level in Tsuram harbor to automatically tell time. The bell rung rhythmically in perfect time.

Balsa walked along the dock with the sound of the bell echoing in her ears. A shop that dealt in expensive jewelry was set up right in the middle of the harbor's main market. She verified its location with a little nod, then stopped in place.

There were actually two large jewelry stores in Tsuram's market as well as a jeweler that bought and sold large and rare gemstones, but Balsa had heard rumors that this one had recently acquired an incredibly precious ruby. It was possible that the ruby had come from the Talfa necklace.

Balsa turned away from the jewelry store and walked toward a smaller one across the street that was advertising pale sapphires called moonstones. The store faced the main street, so its advertisements were large and colorful to attract buyers. Iron grilles covered all of the store's windows to deter thieves.

A dog barked at Balsa as she turned onto a narrow side-street next to the jewelry store. Balsa couldn't see the dog too clearly because it was dark, but she guessed that it was guarding this alleyway. She walked along the side wall of the jewelry store and discovered a door so small that it was barely taller than her chest.

Balsa had learned about this door from a stolen goods dealer at one of the nearby taverns. She knocked loudly twice, waited for three seconds, then knocked once more. The muffled sounds her fists made on the door's surface revealed that it was incredibly thick. She hoped that whoever was inside had heard her knock.

A few seconds later, she heard footsteps on the other side of the door. "State your business," a man said.

"The mouse would like to greet the cat," she said.

The door opened to the inside. Bright light illuminated the darkness of the street outside.

"Enter. But you'd better not be carrying any weapons. We'll kill you if you are."

Balsa had left her spear at the inn where she was staying. She passed through the door without so much as a flicker of hesitation. The hallway on the other side of the door was so narrow that people could only pass in single file; it had likely been designed that way to protect against thieves. Balsa doubted that she'd even be able to run in this hallway without her arms getting battered against the walls.

A man stood inside an alcove in the hallway and opened a door for her. He slid past Balsa so that she could enter the next room, then closed the door behind her. She heard a key turn in the door's lock.

The only light inside the room came from a small handheld lantern. The man holding it approached Balsa and checked her for weapons with his right hand while his left hand held the lantern aloft.

"Fine. Let's go. Follow me."

Balsa kept close behind him as he led her into another narrow hallway. A huge door appeared ahead of them in a dim space shaped like a half-dome. A tall young man emerged from the door as Balsa and her escort approached. The man noticed her and side-stepped her without saying anything.

A Yogoese person? Here? The only Yogoese person she'd hoped to meet in Tsuram was Chagum.

Balsa shifted slightly and looked the man in the eyes. He looked at her with keen interest for a few moments, then turned away and vanished in the dark hallway.

"Don't just stand there," a haughty voice called out. "Come in!"

Balsa entered the room behind the huge, elaborate door and was immediately struck by the overwhelming contrast between the bare, dark hallway and the lavishly decorated interior room. The ceiling was high and the room was wide; Balsa blinked to get her bearings.

She saw four men who looked like bodyguards lined up along the opposite wall, all standing still and quiet. A soft rug covered the brightly polished stone floor. Balsa saw a slightly built man of perhaps fifty years of age sitting behind an elaborately carved ebony desk.

"Hm, a female mouse? It's strange to see one from Kanbal."

Balsa felt someone moving behind her. A man put a sword to her back and said, "This is as far as you go."

Balsa shrugged. "Seems a bit excessive, but fine. We can certainly speak from here."

The man behind the desk narrowed his eyes at her. "I've never seen you before, and you speak strangely. If you're a thief, you picked the wrong target. We may just kill you if you say the wrong thing. But if you're here to sell, show us what you've got and we'll talk."

Balsa smiled. "You're mistaken. I'm not here to steal, but I'm not here to sell, either. I'm here to buy."

The man behind the desk appeared puzzled. "Huh? What did you come to buy?"

"Information," Balsa said. "If you can give me what I'm looking for, I'll reward you well."

The man behind the desk pointed to one of his bodyguards. "You. Guard the door outside."

The bodyguard nodded, crossed the room, opened the door and left.

"Shall I get right to the point, then?" Balsa asked.

The man frowned at her severely. "Speak."

"Someone sold something at the Tatan jewelry store recently," Balsa said. "Something rare and expensive. I understand that the shop owner specializes in purchasing such goods."

The man behind the desk laughed. "I see. You know that Orshi and I are enemies and came here to dig up dirt on him. Or maybe you're trying to rile me up so that he'll sympathize with you and talk?" The man glared at Balsa. "Don't make me laugh, mouse. What do you take me for? Do you honestly think that I'd share anything about my own private business with a stranger?"

Balsa snorted. "Good answer. I know now that you're not greedy. So I guess you have no interest in what Orshi's managed to get his hands on, either." She folded her arms. "If that's the case, sorry to have wasted your time." Balsa faced the door and prepared to leave.

The bodyguard who had threatened Balsa with a sword seized her arms.

"Who said you could leave?" the man behind the desk said. A faint smile played about his lips. "Tell me, then—just what did Orshi get his hands on now?"

Balsa stared at him. "Are you interested in buying that information?"

The man tapped his fingers along the scabbard of a short sword that was resting on top of his desk. "I won't know if I'm interested in what you're offering unless you tell me," he said. "I've got no idea what your information is worth."

Balsa tilted her head. "In that case, I'll take what I know to Orshi himself. I'm sure he'd pay well to keep the rumors quiet."

Rage flashed in the man's eyes. "I warned you, didn't I? That if we didn't like what you had to say, we'd kill you? Where did you hear these rumors? What are they? When did you hear them?"

Balsa made no attempt to free her arms. She said, "Orshi recently came into possession of a Talfa necklace. That's the rumor. I want to know the name of the man who sold it to him."

The silence that fell following her statement was tense and drawn-out. The man behind the desk had mostly just sneered at her in contempt so far, but now his expression seemed considerably more guarded and wary.

"Why are both a Yogoese and a Kanbalese person after that damn necklace?" he muttered.

Balsa's eyes widened. "That Yogoese man—he wanted to know about the necklace, too?"

The man behind the desk slammed both palms down on top of it. "I'm the one asking the questions here, mouse. I was right from the start; you're here to cause trouble. If you don't stay still and answer my questions, you won't make it out of here alive."

The grip of the man holding Balsa's hands behind her back tightened. He tried to push her down, but Balsa resisted and slipped free. She pulled the man over her shoulder and down so that he somersaulted and landed head-first on the floor with a loud thud.

Balsa kicked the man while he was down to make sure he'd stay still. She took three steps closer to the man behind the desk, then jumped up on the desk itself. She jumped over the man's head and seized him in a headlock, then kicked the desk completely over.

The man's short sword fell onto the rug with a dull sound as the desk crashed into the room's side wall. The bodyguards in the room unsheathed their swords. Balsa tightened her grip on their leader's neck and said, "Don't move!"

The bodyguards froze. The knew that Balsa could snap the man's neck in an instant.

"I have no more time to waste," Balsa said. "Tell me everything you know, and quickly."

Balsa bent down a little and whispered in the leader's ear: "That man before was after the Talfa necklace. Right?"

The leader nodded.

"Who was he?" Balsa asked.

"I don't know!" the leader said.

When Balsa's grip tightened further, the leader clawed at Balsa's arms with his hands. "I honestly don't know!" he choked out. "He said a noble from Sangal hired him!"

"What did he want to know about the Talfa necklace?"

"The same thing as you. He wanted to know who sold the necklace to Orshi."

Balsa's blood ran cold. Someone else was searching for Chagum.

"Did you tell him?" she asked.

The leader nodded.

"Well, then," Balsa said, "tell me."

The man made a strange sound like a chuckle low in his throat, but it sounded strangled. "That man had the King of Sangal's seal to sell.

That's how he got in the door. I doubt you have anything like that to offer me."

Balsa laughed. "Well, I really was going to pay you, but now I don't think there's really a need." She used all her strength to press down on the man's windpipe. He flailed wildly with his arms and legs.

"So," Balsa said casually. "How about you tell me what you told that man?"

The leader struggled harder and gasped, "Wait! Wait! I'll tell you! I swear!"

"Thanks," Balsa said. "I also want to know everything you do about that Yogoese man." She lowered her voice. "I have eyes and ears in many places, so if I hear something else about that man from someone else that proves that you were lying to me, I'll be back to kill you."

She felt the leader nod and loosened her arms a little. "Speak, then."

The leader talked in fits and spurts, coughing as he sucked in air. Balsa let go of his throat with his left arm, allowing him to breathe a bit more freely. She listened to him in silence, watching the other bodyguards for signs of movement.

The man she'd knocked out started to stir on the floor. It looked to her like his left collarbone was broken.

After the leader finished speaking, Balsa whispered in his ear again. "Sooner or later, I'll find out if you just told me the truth or not. You'll regret any lies you told; I promise you that. I suspect you don't really know how much trouble you're actually in. It's better for you not to know the details." She sighed. "I still think you're not telling me everything you know."

The leader was silent.

"Last chance," Balsa said. "Anything else to add?"

"First, tell me what kind of trouble I'm in," the leader said.

She shook her head. "You answer me first."

"How do I know you won't snap my neck as soon as I answer you?"

Balsa chuckled. "Try to think things all the way through. I came here alone to buy your information. If you'd just told me what you knew without a fuss, I would have left quietly. You got greedy and threatened me, which is why you're in this situation now. You must understand that I'm not some sneak thief or petty burglar. I have no desire to break your neck and escalate tensions further."

The leader slowly relaxed his arms and shoulders. He whispered a name that he hadn't said until now: "Red-Eyed Yuzan. That's what they call him. He's the one who sold it."

Balsa nodded in encouragement. "Tell me everything you know about him."

The leader told her about ships he'd been spotted near and bars he liked to frequent. "Before he went to Orshi's, he came to my store to sell, but I didn't buy what he was offering. I knew that necklace would bring nothing but bad luck. And besides, I've got a reputation to maintain. I've been dealing in stolen goods for thirty years; my instincts are rarely wrong."

Balsa nodded again. "I agree that your intuition is good." She pulled the leader up one-armed and stepped over the overturned desk. The leader's bodyguards immediately shouted at her.

"Lay down your weapons," Balsa said. "Then follow me outside. If I make it safely, I'll return your leader to you. If you try any tricks on the way, I'll break his neck."

The bodyguards all looked at their leader, who nodded. They put aside their weapons and followed Balsa out into the hallway. She walked back toward the door with the leader's neck clasped firmly under her right arm.

She opened the small door that led to the outside one-handed, feeling a gentle night breeze. The bodyguards watched Balsa enter the alley outside the shop sullenly.

Balsa kept a close eye on their faces and stepped away from them. She caught a flash of movement out of the corner of her eye and ducked to avoid a blow to the back of her head. She took a step forward and

tossed the leader about, using him as a shield when another bodyguard tried to attack her from the front.

Balsa threw the leader onto the ground, then stepped on his shoulders and used the slight added height to springboard off of him and leap over the bodyguards' heads. She dashed quickly down the alley toward the main street.

She broke into a cold sweat as she passed by all the street lamps and brightly lit shops. The man who had been sent to guard the door of the leader's shop barred her way forward. He slashed at her head so quickly with his sword that he nearly managed to cut her, but she noticed his movement in time and ducked to avoid him. She ran under his arm and continued sprinting past him.

Balsa's ankle ached with every step she took. She'd twisted it when she'd kicked over the leader's desk. She scolded herself internally for not being more careful. She knew that she was getting older and had to be more mindful of injury, but she'd given herself this same lecture whenever she'd been injured over the years and rarely heeded it.

Animals that can't run get eaten. Jiguro had often said that to her.

"I know, I know," she muttered to herself, "but I'm not that old yet..."

Balsa gritted her teeth and kept running despite the pain. She reached the main street and slowed down in the crowd. The stores and bars were all starting to get busy with customers.

Balsa pushed through the crowd and ducked into a narrow space behind a building, then checked to make sure she wasn't being followed. She didn't see anyone chasing her, but her body thrummed with nervous energy. She felt uncharacteristically terrified.

Someone else is searching for Chagum. They have a head start.

She had no way of tracking the Yogoese man: she didn't even know his name. She'd have to try investigating Red-Eyed Yuzan first. She had to prevent information about Chagum from falling into the wrong hands. She only hoped it wasn't too late.

Chapter 5 - Red-Eyed Yuzan

The sails of a fast, sleek ship reflected the dim light of lanterns from the harbor. A strong-looking Sangalese pirate stood still on the ship's deck and ran his hand lovingly along the edge of a sail. There were no other people on the ship. Whenever a wave hit the side, light from the harbor played over the pirate's shoulders, illuminating a tattoo in the shape of red fish eyes.

When are you coming back? Red-Eyed Yuzan grumbled internally. He hadn't planned to stay in this Rotan harbor for so long, but his ship had taken quite a long time to repair. He'd spent long years on board this ship, but this was the first time she'd taken such severe damage in a storm. And she'd been damaged before that as well. He felt fortunate that the ship had made it to Tsuram in one piece.

He also felt fortunate that he had the money for repairs. He'd recently come into quite a large sum by a stroke of good luck, so he'd been able to pay the shipwrights and carpenters in advance to take care of the repairs, including the removal and replacement of rotten sections of his hull and mast. Leaving the rot be would have caused the ship to sink eventually—and likely sooner rather than later.

So Yuzan had shelled out the money for repairs and waited impatiently for them to be done. He had sold a lot of loot here and wanted to get going. Staying put for too long would only attract the wrong kind of attention.

Still, he understood why the repairs had taken so long. His ship had been in terrible repair before; he certainly wouldn't have made it through another storm. He had shelled out the money for the repairs and waited impatiently until they were done. He had sold a lot of treasure here, and that would inevitably attract the wrong kind of attention.

Yuzan's crew had rejoiced at getting such a long harbor stay and were probably out in the bars and taverns enjoying themselves even now, or gambling or getting into other kinds of mischief. Yuzan liked his crew; they were all good people born on the same island as him. But most of them had loose lips and loved talking, so staying in port for too long was never very safe. His younger brother Rago was the worst of the lot. He loved regaling people with tales, gossip, and really anything he knew.

It's not his fault; he was just born that way, Yuzan thought.

Yuzan had forbidden his crew from speaking about the treasure they'd taken on board, but his brother had spilled his guts about it anyway. Yuzan sighed. At least the ship was leaving tomorrow morning.

Yuzan checked over the rigging of his ship one last time, then jumped to shore. It was past midnight. He needed to round up his crew soon so that they could prepare the ship for departure. He found the bar where his brother liked to drink and entered.

The air was choked with thick smoke. Six lamps hung from hooks on the ceiling, casting the faces of the drunken people sitting in the bar in dim illumination. Yuzan glanced around the bar, identifying members of his crew and ordering them to return to the ship.

His brother Rago was sitting in the corner, gambling with a Yogoese man named Orokku. His brown eyes shone with excitement, so he must be winning. He laid down playing cards and chugged his drink as if it were water.

"Oi, get up," Yuzan called out to him. "We're leaving tomorrow."

Rago looked at him and laughed. "Just wait a minute. I'm on a winning streak, but I'll come back to the ship soon."

Yuzan took a peek at his brother's cards. He did seem to have a good hand. Orokku passed two silver coins across the table to Rago with a grim expression on his face. "I lose," Orokku said. "You've got the luck of the stars tonight, Rago."

Rago laughed. "Not just tonight, my friend—I've been lucky since birth. Now, hand over everything you owe me."

Orokku rubbed his chin thoughtfully while Rago finished his drink. Rago grinned at Yuzan and said, "Look! This is araku—incredibly rare, even for those that can pay for it, but this place has got it. How about a nightcap before we head back?"

Yuzan smiled. He liked araku as much as his brother did. It might be good luck to raise a toast with it before the next morning's voyage.

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When Yuzan and his brother returned to his ship, all of his crewmen were drunk and smelled of alcohol. They talked and laughed while preparing to sleep. Rago called out, "A toast, men! Let's have one more drink and go to sleep."

Rago lifted the cap off of his bottle of araku and poured a large quantity of it into an enormous cup for the crew to share. The crew each took a sip and went to their resting places in the best possible mood.

Yuzan entered his own cabin and sank into a chair. He savored the lingering taste of the araku in his mouth: bitter and sweet and unlike anything else he'd ever tasted. There was a lit candle on his desk, but it was flickering and puffing. The wick must be too long. *I should cut it,* he thought, but before he could get up, he fell asleep.

He awoke some time later. He had no idea how long he'd been asleep; he wasn't even sure if he was actually awake or still dreaming. He looked down and saw a pool of dark water sloshing around his ankles.

Huh? Is there a flood? Is the ship sinking?

He had to get up and warn the crew, but his body wouldn't move.

There was a man crouched down near his desk. It was the Yogoese merchant that Rago had stolen the large bottle of araku from; the araku that he'd shared with Yuzan and the rest of the crew. But why was he in Yuzan's cabin? How had he gotten here?

"What the hell is going on?" Yuzan asked.

The Yogoese merchant smiled. "You're dreaming. I come from the bottom of the sea. Do you want to save your ship from sinking?"

Yuzan nodded desperately.

The man chuckled. He was still crouched down in the corner and hadn't moved. "You've planted a seed of disaster—a karuku oh—for your next voyage. Did you know that?"

Yuzan froze still, then said, "I should've known that boy was trouble..."

The Yogoese man nodded. "Tell me everything you know about that boy. If you don't, your luck will get a whole lot worse. I'll take your secrets and misfortune down to the bottom of the sea, so they won't trouble you any further."

Yuzan nodded and smiled with relief. "Yes, yes, I'll tell you everything. I first saw that boy when..."

Suddenly, he felt a sharp pain at the back of his skull and groaned. He felt like something hard had hit him in the head; he only received a single blow, but pain bloomed from the point of impact.

He felt the shaking of the ship in his entire body and realized that he hadn't felt it before: during this whole conversation, the ship had been utterly still. He glanced down and saw that his legs and the floor of his cabin were both dry.

Yuzan looked up, wide-eyed. The Yogoese man lay prone on his desk. Yuzan couldn't tell if he was dead or just unconscious. His body was completely still.

Yuzan heard movement behind him and turned to see a Kanbalese woman in her mid-thirties standing over him.

"Have you recovered your senses?" she asked. "Can you see?"

Yuzan frowned. "What the hell is going on here? And who are you?" There was ringing in his ears. He put his hand over his mouth to suppress his urge to vomit.

"We can talk after I deal with this man," the woman said. She removed a long length of twine from around her wrist and bound the

Yogoese man's hands. Then she grabbed a towel hanging from the cabin's ceiling and used it and more twine to make a gag. "Where's your closet?" she asked Yuzan.

He showed her. She opened the door of the closet with a loud snap and removed a long, thin length of cloth to use as a blindfold.

"Do you have rope?" she asked.

"Yes, in the cupboard on the right-hand side," Yuzan said.

The woman used a long length of rope to bind the Yogoese man's legs so that he wouldn't be able to move when he regained consciousness. Yuzan wondered if he was still dreaming; the entire situation was inexplicable.

The woman lifted the Yogoese man upright and carried him out of the cabin. Yuzan's head still ached horridly; he sat for a few minutes until it felt clearer, then stood up from his desk. Lingering nausea made his stomach protest at the movement. He took his sword, which was hanging from the wall, and unsheathed it. He gripped his weapon firmly as he ascended to the deck.

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Balsa took the Yogoese man to a shipwright's hut near the harbor and tied him to a support post with more rope. She didn't want to let this man live. He was after Chagum and probably trying to kill him. She looked down at the man with darkness clouding her eyes for a long while. She took a deep breath and turned away. She decided to go outside and calm herself.

Balsa saw the ships docked in the faint illumination of the harbor's lamps. Red-Eyed Yuzan stood on the deck of his ship, staring at her and holding a sword. She saw no other people stirring in the harbor at this time of night. Balsa picked up a long wooden oar that was leaning against the shipwright's hut. She gripped it as she would her spear and walked toward Red-Eyed Yuzan.

Yuzan's stance was defensive. "Who are you?" His voice cracked a little, as if he were an apprentice pirate on his first ship.

"How rude. Shouldn't you be thanking me for what I did before?" Balsa asked. She clicked her tongue.

"Thank you? For what?"

Balsa climbed up onto Yuzan's ship and assumed her own defensive stance. "That man's a magic weaver. I freed you from his spell."

Yuzan frowned. "A magic weaver?" He thought about that for a moment. It was obvious that the Yogoese man was a magic weaver: he'd made Yuzan see things that weren't there. He must have done that by spiking Rogo's stolen araku. He'd fallen asleep after just a single sip from the bottle, which was awfully suspicious—and none of his crew was awake, either. They'd done nothing to interfere with the Yogoese man or this Kanbalese woman.

A chill went down Yuzan's spine. His face was drawn and pale. "Why did you save me?" he asked.

Balsa's expression was flatly serious. "I didn't plan to save you at all," she admitted. "But I couldn't just leave it alone. He was probably going to kill you after you'd answered his questions."

Yuzan adjusted his grip on his sword. "What are you trying to imply, woman? I got no idea what you're even saying."

Balsa faced Yuzan squarely and held her oar tightly in her hand. "I don't have time to explain. I need to know about who you stole the Talfa necklace from."

Yuzan took a step back and shuddered. It was like the woman in front of him had just transformed into a monster. Yuzan gritted his teeth, then yelled, "You bitch! I don't know anything about that! Nothing!" He took a step closer to Balsa and slashed out at her with his sword.

Balsa blocked Yuzan's blade with her oar, then shoved so hard that the broad side of the oar slammed into his nose. Yuzan's blade bent from trying to keep the oar back; sparks flew before Yuzan's eyes.

The smells of blood and burning entered his nose and made his nausea so terrible that he actually dropped his sword. His nose was bleeding profusely; he collapsed to the deck and started shaking all over. He pressed down on his nose with both hands to staunch the bleeding, then lifted his head.

The woman stood over him, looming like the shadow of a mountain. She rested the handle of her oar against his forehead and said, "Attack me again, and I'll finish you off right here."

The place where the oar's handle touched Yuzan's forehead felt strangely warm. "You...where's the other one? The magic weaver?"

"I'm the one asking the questions here," Balsa said. "Are you going to answer, or do I have to repeat myself?"

Balsa summoned all her strength and courage to cope with whatever she would hear next.

"I should have killed him," Yuzan muttered. "I knew I should have killed him."

Balsa froze still from surprise.

Yuzan's hands were red and sticky from his own blood. He pushed himself up a little and sat cross-legged on the deck. "I should have known that boy was a karuku oh." He shrugged. "I really don't know if he's alive or dead." He looked up at Balsa and said quickly, "And I'm really not lying, I swear. He was really weird; I don't want anything to do with him at all."

"Where did you last see him? Where was he going? Tell me everything you know."

Yuzan spat on the deck, his spittle mixing with his own blood. He took a deep breath and started talking. "He told me he wanted to get to Tsuram harbor as fast as possible."

Balsa frowned. Yuzan's story didn't make a lot of sense so far.

"He was on a Rassharou ship when my crew and I found him. We don't usually attack Rassharou ships; they say it's bad luck to harm them. But my ship had just survived a terrible storm. We were short on

food and other supplies, and the fish had all fled to the deeps so we were starving."

Rassharou were a free-spirited, independent people who were born on ships and spent most of their lives at sea. Chagum hadn't been picked up by a Sangalese ship, but a Rassharou one. It seemed that he'd made it most of the way to Rota that way. Perhaps he'd thought that seeking help from the Rassharou would be safer than trying to trust the Sangalese?

Yuzan was still speaking. "Besides, Rassharou are usually poorer than pirates, so it's cruel to rob them. But we needed food, and loot, otherwise we would never be able to get the ship repaired. We noticed an astonishingly beautiful girl on the ship; I thought she would sell for a good price in Tsuram. It's unfortunate that we have to resort to that sometimes, but...well, anyway, we hooked their little ship with poles and yanked them in."

The girl, her younger brother and her parents seemed to be the only ones on the Rassharou ship. They all trembled in fear when Yuzan and his men unsheathed their swords. When Yuzan seized the girl's arm, a young man emerged from hiding beneath one of the sails. He was Yogoese and deeply suntanned. He was dressed in Rassharou fashion, with a patterned garment like a skirt wrapped around his waist; he wore nothing else.

Yuzan knew immediately that the Yogoese man wasn't a fisherman or a merchant. He didn't know how he knew, exactly, but he felt something off about him from the start.

The young man removed a smooth piece of jade from a pouch at his waist and tossed it to Yuzan. As Yuzan caught it, the young man addressed him in fluent Sangalese: "If you're looking to sell something, why not sell that instead?" He was so young that he lacked a beard, but he radiated an aura of calm composure. His voice didn't shake at all.

The young man gave Yuzan an uneasy feeling. He was in a place he shouldn't be and had interfered in an unexpected way. Yuzan wanted nothing to do with him, but he also couldn't just let him and the

Rassharou ship go now that he'd seen the young man carrying the treasure.

"Why settle for selling one when you can sell two?" Yuzan asked brightly. "Right, men?"

He advanced a few steps, then saw something else in the young man's hand. It was an incredibly expensive-looking necklace made of gold. His crew noticed it as well and exchanged greedy glances.

The young man dangled the necklace over the side of the ship and dropped it into the water.

"Are you out of your mind?!" Rogo shouted. He dove into the water to retrieve the necklace, but the sea was so deep here that it sank like a stone and was lost in moments. Yuzan couldn't believe that the young man was truly capable of tossing away that much wealth without a second thought.

The young man removed his treasure pouch from his waist and prepared to drop the entire thing overboard: gold, gems, jewelry and all. When Yuzan moved to stop him, the young man called out, "Don't move! If you take one step closer, I'll drop it."

Yuzan knew that he was serious. "Why would you do something so stupid?" he asked. "If you do that, my crew won't have any other choice except to sell you and the girl."

The young man smiled. "Are you really willing to give up having all of this? Surely the treasure in this pouch is worth more than me and the girl combined at any market. But I don't really need it, so..."

Yuzan sank into silence. There was another necklace inside the pouch, as rare and valuable as the one the young man had tossed overboard. The contents of the bag glittered in the sun. What the young man had said was true: the treasure in that pouch was worth far more than the price of two slaves.

Yuzan stood in front of the young man and didn't move.

The light in the young man's eyes was so bright that it was blinding. "Leave these people alone, and I'll give all of this to you," the young man said. "Return to your ship. Let this ship go and remove the hooks. Then I'll toss the treasure over to you."

Yuzan was wary. "How do we know you'll really toss the treasure over to us? If you really want to save these Rassharou, come to our ship with us."

The young man's expression was difficult to read. "All right," he said after a long pause. "On one condition." He stared straight at Yuzan. "I need you to sell me in Rota, in Tsuram harbor."

Yuzan frowned at him. That was certainly a weird condition. Did he actually want to be sold? As Yuzan considered his condition, he realized that this situation could turn out very well for him. Tsuram was the closest harbor; if he sold the young man's treasure along with him, he'd be richer than he'd ever been before.

"Very well; I accept your condition. I'll sell you when he reach Tsuram. Now come here."

The young man shook his head. "First, return to your ship. If you doubt I'll keep my word, you can keep a harpoon trained on me. I swear I won't make any sudden moves."

Yuzan shrugged, then gave his crew the signal to pull back. Everyone returned to his ship. As soon as they let the Rassharou ship go with their hooks, the young man jumped over to Yuzan's boat with his treasure pouch held in his mouth. After he landed safely on the deck of Yuzan's ship, he extended the treasure pouch over the water again.

The Rassharou family waved to the young man. They were openly weeping and crying out words of gratitude. The young man watched their ship recede into the distance with a sad sort of smile.

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When Yuzan finished telling Balsa about his meeting with Chagum, she nodded a little to herself. "So you sold him to a slave merchant here?" she asked.

Yuzan shook his head. "I didn't sell him." He placed one palm flat on the deck and used it to push himself upright. They'd talked the night away; it was almost dawn. The sea looked steel blue in the early morning light.

Yuzan's gaze drifted toward the city. "I know you might not believe me, but it's not like my crew's all that greedy. I'm certainly not. A Talfa

necklace is a once-in a lifetime prize. Added to the other jewels in the pouch, me and my crew got enough money to hold us over for quite some time. There was no need to sell the brat."

The gray light of dawn shone on Yuzan's face. Yuzan looked at Balsa and said, "That guy was weird. He gave me the creeps, asking to be sold as a slave like that."

"What happened to him after that?" Balsa asked.

Yuzan smiled bitterly. "I told you before: I don't know. I let him off here. He handed over his treasure and we sold it. I have no idea where he went after that."

Balsa sighed heavily; all the tension in her shoulders released at once.

Yuzan looked so exhausted that it was like his soul had left his body. He was still looking toward the harbor city. Balsa faced the same direction as him and took in all the shops and buildings.

I guess my lead ends here, she thought. Chagum had gotten off at Tsuram, but he could be anywhere by now. If he'd been sold to a slave trader, she might be able to keep looking, but apparently Yuzan hadn't sold him. She was glad that Chagum hadn't been sold, but she was still desperate for more information.

At least she knew that Chagum had made it to Tsuram alive, and that he had left Yuzan's ship a free man. He could walk to his next destination healthy and strong, no matter where that destination happened to be. The idea gave her comfort; this was much better than finding out that Chagum truly was dead or had been enslaved.

He's alive.

She couldn't celebrate yet; she had to see him safe with her own eyes before she could do that. She couldn't get her hopes up and risk disappointment. She told herself that, but on the inside, she was practically dancing for joy. Chagum was still alive. He might still be in Tsuram somewhere.

Tsuram harbor came back to life itself in the glorious light of the morning. Barges floated in the river mouth that would doubtless be

floated on to the capital that day. A slight hill rose to the right of the river; homes were built all along the top of it in a long line.

At the very top of the hill there was a large white building that looked like a palace. It had two towers and shone dazzlingly in the sun.

"That's the palace of some lord or other, huh?" Balsa asked.

Yuzan nodded. "That's lord Suan's palace." He paused, then muttered, "That brat asked the same question."

Balsa faced him so quickly she almost gave herself whiplash. "Really? He did?" she asked.

"Yep. I told him it was one of the southern clan lords' palaces. He asked whose and I told him it was lord Suan's. He thanked me, then laughed. Ran off in that direction still wearing his Rassharou skirt thing."

Balsa threw down her oar and seized Yuzan's arm. "When was this?"

"Uh...well, I'm not sure, I..." He stared into space for a moment, then started counting the days on his fingers. "About ten days ago, I think."

Balsa frowned. Ten days. When Jin's message had reached her, Chagum had likely still been here. She let Yuzan's arm go and said, "I assume that everything you've told me is the truth?"

Yuzan shrugged. "I've got no reason to lie. But even if I swore I was telling the truth, I ain't got no evidence, so you're just gonna have to take my word for it anyway."

Balsa's eyes took on a hard cast as she looked at Yuzan. "You should leave this harbor with your crew as soon as you can. That magic weaver almost certainly has allies, and I doubt they're friendly. You should probably stay out of Rota for a while to avoid them. If you value your life, don't tell anyone else about the young man you saw, or the Talfa necklace or other treasure."

Yuzan rubbed his nose and nodded a little, clearly at least a little frightened by her threat. "I was planning on keeping quiet anyway. And leaving as soon as possible. It's too dangerous for me and the crew here now."

Balsa nodded, then started walking away from him. She crossed the plank that connected his ship to the dock, then turned when she felt Yuzan's hand on the board, attempting to disrupt her crossing. He removed his hand from the plank until she was safely ashore.

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Yuzan realized that the woman was dragging her right foot a little with every step. *What a strange woman.* He'd told her everything he knew and felt strangely purified by the experience, as if he'd confessed to all his transgressions and been given a clean start.

He wondered why he'd been so willing to tell her so much from the start; it wasn't like he knew her from anywhere. She was intimidating and made him feel tense all over; she'd asked all her questions without changing her expression or tone, but it was clear that she cared if the young man he'd encountered on the Rassharou ship was alive or dead.

He remembered the young man walking toward lord Suan's palace after his ship had reached the harbor. He had turned back when he reached the shore and given Yuzan a bright smile.

What have I gotten myself mixed up in? Yuzan asked himself. He hadn't wanted to get involved with any of this to start with, but the magic weaver and the strange woman had pulled him into this situation even deeper.

That brat is like a whirlpool. Everything that comes near him gets sucked down to the bottom of the sea.

Yuzan rubbed his sore nose and started waking the members of his crew. They would leave the harbor as soon as possible.

Chapter 6 - Premonition

Tanda woke up when he heard Balsa's voice.

The door to his hut was open, so the red light of sunset streamed through it unimpeded. He heard a sound like a bird call from far away; when he strained his ears to listen, he lost the sound.

The hut was quiet. There was no one else here.

Tanda stayed still with his arm on his pillow and glanced out of his open door. He was sleepy, yet also very awake; it was a strange feeling. His limbs felt heavy, but his mind was alert.

This wasn't the first time Tanda had awakened at sunset lately. It didn't happen every night, but he often woke when he heard Balsa's voice. Waking up and seeing that she wasn't next to him filled him with an indescribable loneliness.

The peaceful life wasn't for Balsa; she wasn't the sort of person who could settle down. Whenever she stayed too long in one place, even a place she liked, she started getting a restless urge to travel.

But Tanda liked putting down roots. He liked staying in one place and having each day be similar to the one before it. In this one area, he and Balsa were completely different. When he'd asked Balsa if they should try to raise Asra and Chikisa in his hut, she'd shaken her head at him and said, "I can't simply live for those children. There are more people I have to save."

Nothing Tanda had said managed to change her mind.

It took a long time for Asra to wake up after her struggle with Talhamaya, and an even longer time to recover her health and strength. But even after she was able to do much of what she could before—walk, run, and play—she never recovered her voice. Balsa remained with her and protected her like a mother hen would her hatchling, but when it was clear that Asra could not recover more than she had, Balsa had

taken both Asra and Chikisa to Shirogai to stay at the Samada store with Martha.

Tanda knew that Balsa had known Martha since her own childhood and that she was a very capable woman. He was certain she'd be able to take good care of Chikisa and Asra. But parting with them after so long in their company made Tanda feel lonely. Even Balsa seemed lonely these days.

Tanda rested his too-warm cheek against the cool floor. *It's been quite a while since that messenger came.* Tanda wondered if Balsa had been able to find Chagum or if she was still desperately searching for him. He sighed. He couldn't help but worry about them both. Even if Balsa had managed to find Chagum, there was no guarantee that the two of them were safe.

Tanda had heard through Torogai, who had heard it from Shuga, that Chagum had spent most of his final years in the palace being shunned by the Mikado. The Mikado would doubtless try to keep the fact that Chagum was alive quiet if it became widely known. He'd already had a funeral for Chagum and proclaimed him as a god that would protect New Yogo from war.

But Balsa would do absolutely anything to save Chagum. Tanda was sure that he would come back from Rota alive. The consequences of that were anyone's guess. Balsa was getting herself sucked into events that would have repercussions far beyond her own actions or responsibilities; he hoped she knew what she was getting into. It wasn't the first time she'd risked everything for Chagum's sake.

Tanda covered his face with his arms. The situation was too complex for him to understand fully. He had no idea what Balsa and Chagum should do next.

Tanda could do nothing but worry: for Balsa, for Chagum, for himself. No one knew what the future would bring. He comforted himself with the idea that he had choices.

Everyone has something that only they can do—look at me, and look at you. The most important thing for you to do now now is to survive. If you

don't, you'll never see them again.

He remembered Torogai saying something similar to him long ago. He believed she was right, like she always was, but he didn't feel like survival was sufficient, somehow. He closed his eyes and went to sleep.

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When Tanda awoke, dawn light played over the mountains to the northeast. When he sat up, he felt slightly dizzy. He scolded himself internally: You've got to do better than this. *You shouldn't let worry make you this weak and tired.*

Nayugu's spring had awakened something in the earth. Cut-beetles had appeared in huge numbers and swarmed over tree roots to eat them, but that was just one minor sign of a much deeper problem. Whenever Tanda stood under a tall tree or at the base of a mountain, he felt as if the earth was crying out to him in some way. Torogai had ordered him to map the unusually warm current in the river of Nayugu that he'd been feeling since the start of Nayugu's spring, so he'd gone all over New Yogo to speak with magic weavers in other villages and ask questions about what they'd observed.

For Tanda as well as other magic weavers, peering into Nayugu was becoming increasingly more difficult—and exhausting. When Tanda tried to map the course of Nayugu's river, he saw a large body of water moving northeast toward Kanbal, building up in quantity and intensity like a tidal wave, like it was caught up against a cliff and was waiting for a trigger to release it. Kanbal's southern mountains seemed relatively unaffected; the water gathered over New Yogo's forests and mountain ranges, thinning out and disappearing as it flowed further north. He couldn't see more without stepping entirely into Nayugu, and then he'd have to leave his body behind in Sagu.

He and Torogai had just returned from their long journey to all the villages when he'd seen the messenger at their door. A single night of fitful sleep had done little to restore his energy; he didn't feel up to

doing any magic weaving at all. He ate an early lunch and lay back down for a nap afterwards; he was still so tired that he fell asleep almost immediately.

Every magic weaver had their limits. The power of the soul could easily be exhausted by spending too much time in Nayugu. He'd been a magic weaver for a long time, but this was the first time he'd ever felt that he'd run completely out of energy.

Chagum was able too see Nayugu easily while he was incubating the water spirit. It seemed so easy, too, but maybe it really wasn't. There's a cost to all of this.

Asra had also been able to see Nayugu at will, with no preparation or active work on her part. Maybe some people just had the talent for it and others didn't. He suddenly remembered something Torogai had said: "Sometimes fish from Nayugu are visible on this side, too, though I'm not entirely sure why. Some of our birds and fish can see the ones that glow in the dark in Nayugu, which is why you saw so many of those lights being eaten, I think."

Why are Nayugu and Sagu two separate worlds in the first place? Are they even separate?

The water spirit had used Chagum to mature, but it had needed shigu salua flowers to hatch. And there must be more people like him and Asra; more people who could see both worlds at once or one at a time at will. Tanda's forehead creased in concentration.

Even if there were more people like Chagum and Asra, they had to be exceedingly rare. The water spirit had chosen Chagum and no other—maybe Chagum had been the only appropriate choice. But why was he chosen? Tanda still wasn't sure.

The sound of footsteps made Tanda lose his focus. He turned toward the sound and saw someone climbing up the mountain path toward the hut—and they weren't alone.

"Mr. Tanda!" a slightly hesitant voice called out to him.

Tanda quickly stood up from the dirt floor and leaned out the doorway to take a closer look. "Chikisa?"

Chikisa and Asra stood next to one another on the mountain path with the setting sun behind them.

"What a wonderful surprise!" Tanda said brightly. "I was just thinking about you both. I'm so happy you're here. Come in, come in!"

Chikisa looked openly relieved. He pushed Asra's back a little to encourage her to go forward, then walked behind her into Tanda's house. Asra appeared frightened and looked down.

"Just sit down there," Tanda said, "right by the fire. I'll make us all something to eat. Rest your legs a little. If you want to wash up a little, you can use the water in that pot over there." He made a fire in the center of the room, which wasn't too difficult; he'd banked it before he'd fallen asleep. The grass and small twigs caught in a flash; he was soon feeding firewood into the fire pit in preparation for cooking a meal.

The fire crackled and popped in the center of the room, making the hut brighter. Chikisa and Asra sat down right in front of it and extended their hands over the flames. "I'm sorry for coming without sending word," Chikisa said.

Tanda laughed. "You're free to come here whenever you like. There's no need to announce yourselves. But it must have been a long way to come on your own."

"We didn't," Chikisa said. "We came with Martha all the way to the capital. We visited Toya's Everything Store yesterday morning; he was the one who told us where to find you. I got a little worried when the sun started setting and we still hadn't made it."

Tanda put some water in a pot, then hung it over the fire to boil. "I'm glad you made it here today, too. I would have been away tomorrow. I've been traveling myself, so I don't have as much fresh food as usual... I guess we'll have to make do with what will go in the pot."

Tanda looked at Asra and said, "I know you both came all this way, but Balsa isn't here. She's traveling herself; I'm not sure when she'll be back."

Asra kept staring at the floor. She hadn't looked up once since coming inside. Chikisa glanced at her, then looked up at Tanda. "We wanted to see Balsa too, of course, but we really came to see you, Mr. Tanda."

Tanda's eyebrows went up. "Me? Well, that's nice of you to say, but...why?"

Chikisa looked at Asra as if he were waiting for some kind of signal. When she simply sat and looked scared, Chikisa returned his gaze to Tanda. Tanda shook his head.

Tanda added rinsed rice to a bamboo steamer and set it over the fire. "Well, there's no rush, is there?" he said when he sat down. "I can't offer you much better than rice and wild vegetables, though."

Chikisa nodded, then seemed to remember something. He stood up to retrieve something from his pack, which he then passed to Tanda; it was something wrapped neatly in oiled paper. "This is from Ms. Martha," he said.

Tanda wiped his hands on his clothes to dry them, then accepted the package and unwrapped it. There were candies inside shaped like birds and flowers made of white rice and pure sugar. "Wow! Aren't these pretty."

Chikisa laughed. "Miss Martha wouldn't allow us to visit without bringing a gift. She said it wouldn't be right, not after all you'd done for us."

Tanda remembered Martha's sharp features and kind eyes and felt something that was hard to identify. She was clearly raising Asra and Chikisa to have proper manners; he was sure that he should send a message of thanks to her for taking such good care of the children. He realized he was experiencing something a little like jealousy, but Martha didn't deserve that. He accepted the candy with a posture of sincere gratitude.

"Please give Martha my thanks," he said.

"We will," Chikisa said. He looked down for a moment, then extended another package wrapped in oiled paper. "And, uh, this is something

that I bought for you in the capital. I used most of my money to buy it, so, uh, Miss Martha covered the rest. Please accept it."

Tanda unwrapped this package as well and saw houro inside. Houro was a type of meat that was aged in a salty, spicy paste made from fermented beans. It would be delicious in any stew.

"This is perfect! It will make dinner so much better." He bowed and thanked Chikisa, smiling the entire time. "Thank you. Let's get this roasting, shall we?"

Chikisa and Asra were still apprentices at Martha's store. Houro was quite expensive; Chikisa had just said that he'd used his savings to buy it, but the fact that he had that amount to spend made Tanda feel even better about their living situation. It also made him incredibly grateful, even more so than for the candy; Chikisa could have spent that money on anything, yet he'd chosen to spend it on him.

After the rice and vegetables were done cooking, he removed them from the fire and placed the meat inside a cooking net, which he could open and close with his foot and pull over and off the fire using a long chain. The appetizing smell of the roasting houro filled the air as the meat sizzled. When it was juicy and tender, he removed it from the fire, cut it in pieces and added it to the rice, then added in the wild vegetables.

Chikisa ate like he'd never had anything so good in his entire life. Asra licked the meat tentatively at first, but then reached out her hand for more and started eating just as eagerly as her brother.

Asra looked a little sleepy after eating. Tanda brought each of the children a cup of some sweet tea that he'd brewed himself. Asra glanced over at her brother, then held his gaze. He nodded at her.

"Um, Mr. Tanda, the real reason we came to see you so soon on this trip is that Asra had a dream. It was so frightening that I thought I heard her cry out in her sleep. She couldn't settle down after that; nothing could calm her; she's been antsy like this for three days. She told me that she wanted to go see you and that it couldn't wait. She said she needed to talk to you."

Tanda looked to Asra, expecting her to speak. Asra removed a piece of paper from her pocket and passed it to Tanda. It was an oiled paper wrapper for something; there was writing on the back of it, but Tanda couldn't read it. He blinked down at the unfamiliar letters and said, "Oh, uh...I'm sorry, Asra. I can't read the Tal language."

Chikisa extended his hand; Tanda gave him the paper. "Oh yeah," Chikisa said. "Sorry; I forgot that she can only write in Tal letters."

Chikisa read over what his sister had written and frowned severely. "Hm. This doesn't make a lot of sense to me...I should have guessed that."

"It's all right," Tanda said. "Just read it out. Maybe we can make sense of it together."

Chikisa nodded and started to translate Asra's words into Yogoese.

"Mr. Tanda, thank you so much for saving me. There's something I wanted to tell you about today, so I wrote this letter. I've been having the same dream since spring of last year. I don't really understand what it means; whenever I open my eyes, I forget what happened in it. What pieces I can remember make my chest feel like it's being crushed by a stone. I want to run away and flee—I hear my heartbeat loud in my ears—it's like something is chasing me.

"It feels a little like it did when I was trying to fight off Talhamaya, but it's different."

Asra was staring straight at Tanda. The desperation in her eyes filled Tanda with a sense of unease.

Chikisa was still speaking: "I thought about for a really long time, and finally realized that it reminded me of another dream I had a long time ago, about something swimming in the bright blue waters of Noyook,

far away. Something holy and sacred, like a god, but not like Talhamaya at all. It was very, very far away from me but I still felt it. Whatever is happening in Noyook right now scares me.

"When I crossed the bridge leading into Kosenkyo, I got goosebumps and felt the same way I always do after waking up from my dream. I wanted to run and cry out. I couldn't sleep inside the city without being constantly afraid. I feel like I have to do something, warn someone—but I don't know what I have to do, or what I should warn people about.

"Tell me, Mr. Tanda, what should I do? What am I supposed to do?"

Tanda felt cold all over. "What is this thing you feel?" he asked. "Do you know anything else about it? Where it comes from?"

Asra wrinkled her forehead, then seized her brother's hand and started spelling out letters with her finger. Chikisa translated what his sister was writing, word by slow word.

"It comes from the south," Chikisa said. "But I don't know what it is. I know that it's like a god, but not like the god."

Tanda hmmed. "So it's swimming in Nayugu. Getting closer, going from the south to the north. Is it here now, Asra?"

Chikisa waited for his sister's answer. "No," she spelled out on his palm. "It's still coming, going that way." She pointed.

Tanda sighed in relief. Asra was pointing directly north, toward the Misty Blue Mountains and Kanbal.

Hm. That's the same direction as Nayugu's river, isn't it? The one that felt unusually warm near that village.

Tanda was about to mention this when he heard a sudden knock on his door. Tanda frowned and stood up. "It seems I have a lot of guests today," he said with an apologetic smile. "Excuse me."

He crossed the room, feet moving over the bare earth floor, and opened the door to a man carrying a lantern. His features were scarcely visible in the growing darkness, but Tanda recognized him. "Noshir," he said. Noshir was his older brother.

Noshir stepped a little to the side and avoided meeting Tanda's gaze. Standing this close, Tanda could tell that he was very pale.

"What's wrong, Noshir? Is someone sick? Do you need help?"

Noshir wiped sweat from his deeply tanned forehead with one thick palm and said, "No, not this time. I have something to ask you—well, not just me. The request comes from our younger brother and our whole family."

Tanda knew exactly why Noshir was at his doorstep. He also knew that he wouldn't be able to refuse him. A black shadow fell over his heart as he waited for his brother to put his request into words.

Noshir made no attempt to come inside the hut. He stood at the doorway and said, "Kaiza has been drafted into the imperial army."

Kaiza was Tanda's youngest brother. He'd gotten married the previous year; his wife had given birth to a girl just this past spring. Noshir had gathered the family together to discuss what was to be done. Tanda understood clearly what their decision had been. He stood frozen to the spot as if he'd changed to ice and looked his brother directly in the eyes.

Chapter 7 - The Mysterious Man

Balsa rolled the dice and watched them both land, red-circle up. The men sitting around the table sat back in their seats and frowned at her.

"Shit. You're a lucky lady."

Balsa's eyebrows lifted slightly. She smiled. She'd been playing a game called susutto with guards from lord Suan's castle every night for the past three days. She bought their drinks, played with them and listened to them talk. The guards were bottomless pits when it came to drinking, but they also lost all their filters and inhibitions when they were drunk and would talk about anything as long as she steered the conversation right.

"It's your turn. Try to win this time, eh?" she said.

One of the drunk guards picked up his cup and leaned over the table. He picked up the dice and rolled them with easy, practiced movements.

Balsa's spear rested casually beside her; she made no move to pick it up as the man in front of her prayed for a sign of favor to grant him success at gambling.

Balsa was trying to find out what had happened to Chagum after going toward Suan's palace. Had he been captured, or treated as a guest? Was he still there, or had he gone elsewhere already? These were the things she was trying to find out from the palace guards. Unfortunately, most of the guards she talked to refused to talk about their lord's visitors, no matter how drunk they were.

Balsa needed to gather information without arousing suspicion. Sometimes, she won, but most times she pretended to lose. If her new gambling buddies didn't see her as a threat, it was possible they'd open up to her. Balsa had never gambled much before, but she picked up the rules quickly enough, including how to cheat.

There's nothing wrong with learning how to do something.

She remembered Jiguro telling her that. She didn't really intend to become a gambler here; she was just using the game as cover. She smiled.

Jiguro had worked as a guard for several bars and taverns throughout her life. She remembered him ordering her to go to bed before his night shift at a Rotan tavern with a severe tone; the bars and gambling dens were usually only open at night. She'd still been very young then.

But she hadn't been able to sleep. The inn they'd been staying at was directly above the tavern, so she'd been able to hear the voices of the men talking, drinking and playing below quite clearly. The sounds of people talking, women singing and glasses falling over and shattering had became her usual lullaby.

When Balsa had gotten a little older, she'd worked with the other women in bars and taverns, making money along with Jiguro. In addition to earning her own wages for the first time, she'd learned a lot about gamblers and gambling simply from observation.

Jiguro hadn't scolded her for watching or even for playing occasionally. "There's nothing wrong with learning how to do something. If the skill can earn you money, so much the better." She could almost hear him still, as if he were speaking in her ear.

"I don't know when or how I'll die. Learn as many skills as you can so that when I'm gone, you won't starve," he'd said gruffly.

He'd also warned her about getting addicted to the games and losing sight of what was truly important. She'd seen with her own eyes men and women who had lost everything, down to their last coin to feed their children with. She didn't intend to be a cautionary tale. Consequently, Balsa had determined in advance how much money she was willing to risk and had planned out her strategy accordingly.

Susutto had always been one of her favorite games. It was very easy to manipulate the dice to her advantage using not much more than a flick of her fingers. It was among the very first games she'd ever played

as a young woman; she knew its rules—and ways to exploit them—perfectly.

Balsa grinned as she remembered the old woman who had taught her how to manipulate the dice without it being noticed. She'd split half her profits with the woman during the time she'd been taught. She wondered, briefly, what had happened to her. Balsa knew that she'd lost both her parents very young and all but made her living as a gambler. Parting with her after Jiguro's job had filled her with a deep sense of loneliness that she still felt, sometimes.

The guards she'd chosen tonight were like all the others and refused to let slip any information about their lord's guests. Most of the guards she talked to fell back on professional decorum, but she did manage to learn a few things over the course of five nights. She became convinced that Chagum had, indeed, gone to lord Suan's palace—dressed as a Rassharou fisherman, as Red-Eyed Yuzan had said.

Most of the guards unbent enough when drinking to tell her a little about lord Suan's strange visitor, but when she pressed for more information, they clammed up immediately. She suspected they'd been given specific orders where Chagum was concerned.

If Chagum had truly arrived in Rota safely and managed to use his meeting with lord Suan to procure an audience with the King of Rota, then the situation was essentially out of Balsa's hands. But she had no evidence that Chagum had left lord Suan's palace. She needed to be sure before she headed to Rota's capital to look for him.

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A waitress who smelled of cheap perfume set a huge platter down on the table in front of Balsa. "One large portion of massal," she said. Massal was pulled pork mixed with eggs; the entire dish was deep-fried before serving. "Thank you for waiting."

The guards' noses twitched at the appetizing aroma of the food. "It's here! It's here!"

Balsa watched the guards dig into the large platter of massal with their fingers and grinned. *No wonder they never get any better at susutto. They're so easily distracted.* Not only that, but the oil on their fingers would make it more difficult to grip and manipulate the dice.

Balsa ate her portion of massal carefully and wiped the dice on her clothes so that she wouldn't lose her advantage. She ate with an actual kitchen knife, cutting and spearing pieces; she chewed on small pieces of the pork and eggs and swallowed. It tasted a little different from what she was used to.

This place must use old oil, she thought with a twinge of disappointment. She suddenly felt a lot more like playing rather than eating. The guard sitting across from her was the youngest of the group she was seated with. He picked up the dice and prepared to throw them, then frowned. Sweat made his forehead shine.

The young guard let the dice fall from his fingers at the same moment that he fell out of his chair. Balsa saw a man standing near the door of the tavern give someone a signal. Balsa's hackles raised as she stood up.

Standing made Balsa's head spin; she staggered. She tried to walk toward the door, but her legs wouldn't move. She blinked and saw her vision go double; the world around her spun slowly as she tried to ground herself.

Shit. Poison.

The massal had tasted strange because something had been put in it. The guards at Balsa's table had all fallen unconscious to the floor. The other customers in the tavern all shouted to one another in alarm, making Balsa's headache worse. She heard footsteps behind and around her, their echoes reverberating in the air, and found herself surrounded by four guards with their swords drawn.

Balsa shoved two fingers into the nearest guard's eyes and tried to slip past him and the other guards, but she still couldn't really move her arms and legs. Taking even a single step made her feel so dizzy she

nearly fell. She scarcely knew if she was still standing upright at all; the floor under her feet felt like a steep and insurmountable hill.

Two strong arms seized her from behind. She shook her head to clear it a little, then brought her skull backwards into her captor's nose. She heard the man behind her grunt in pain; his arms loosened, but Balsa wasn't given time to escape. Another guard appeared in front of her and punched her in the gut.

Balsa took a painful breath. Sparks danced across her vision. She felt her arms being gripped behind her back, hard. The guard restraining her pulled her toward the entrance of the tavern by force, then shoved her outside.

The entrance of the tavern was strung with two clotheslines from the walls to hang the clothes and coats of travelers. Balsa saw many Rotan-style coats called koro hanging there. The guard kept his grip on her as they started walking through the room.

A man was standing among the clotheslines; he looked like someone who had just arrived at the tavern. He glanced up at Balsa as she passed.

Balsa felt that the evening air had gotten colder since she'd first entered the tavern; there was a cold wind blowing in through the tavern's door. The man standing near the coats on the clotheslines had his head entirely hidden by a shuma face covering, except for his eyes.

"Oi, you! Get out of the way!" the guard holding Balsa's arms behind her back called out in an arrogant tone. The man seized a cloak from the clothesline and prepared to settle it over his shoulders. A small pouch emerged from the fluttering cloak, hitting the guard standing in front of Balsa directly in the chest.

Impact made the pouch burst. White powder and smoke spread out into the air; the guard in front of Balsa covered his face with his hands and cried out. Balsa couldn't see anything in front of her face at all; neither could the guards behind her. She and the guards coughed violently as the powder and smoke blew over them.

The man wearing the shuma face covering used the distraction to slip past the guards and free Balsa's right arm. He elbowed the guard holding Balsa in the back of the neck; the guard cried out and fell to the ground, unconscious, dragging Balsa down with him.

Another guard clung to Balsa's left arm, but he was coughing so hard that his entire body shook. Balsa pulled herself free and stood up with great effort. She saw the shadow of a man standing behind the guard she'd just freed herself from. The man used the blade of his hand to strike the nape of the guard's neck; the man grunted and collapsed to the dirt with the other guard.

"Can you stand?" the mysterious man asked in a muffled voice.

Balsa felt the man's presence at her elbow, steadying and supporting her. "The exit's that way! Run!" the man said. He pushed her shoulders a little.

Balsa groaned and moved as fast as she could toward the exit. She heard the man fighting off the guards in hand-to-hand combat behind her. She coughed as she ran and couldn't stop. She was so dizzy and her head hurt so badly that she started crying; running only made her dizziness worse. Her vision spun and wavered like she was stuck in the middle of a bad dream.

She had no idea what was happening, or why, but she did know one thing for certain: there were no allies for her here. She was on her own. The fact that the man wearing the shuma had stepped in for her was irrelevant; she wasn't out of danger yet. She suspected that the mysterious man was dangerous as well. She was running from him as well as the guards.

Balsa felt the man grab her arm from behind and pull her up to help her steady herself. "We're almost out," he said. "Look there!" He pointed to the exit, which was only a few feet away.

Balsa tried to shake the man's hand off of her, but her entire body felt numb. Her head felt like a swarm of cicadas was buzzing around inside it; the ringing in her ears was unbearable. Cold sweat leaked from her pores; she was shivering. Darkness dominated the edges of her vision.

She passed out at the same moment she felt the man pick her up and start carrying her.

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Even when she was lost in the darkness, Balsa's unease didn't leave her alone. She felt consciousness returning slowly and saw the light before her eyes, but coming back to her senses provided no relief. There was an irritating sound in her ears; it took her a while to realize that what she was hearing was voices, and even longer to understand what those voices were saying. Balsa kept her eyes closed and listened to the voices she heard.

"I don't know what they used. Chuyal, it looks like—some sort of numbing agent. She's sweating and shivering, so she's cold, but she's also sweating it out. I'd expect her to regain consciousness by morning."

Balsa couldn't quite identify where the voice was coming from. She thought she'd heard the voice before, but she couldn't remember where. The speaker, though, was obviously Yogoese. The only Yogoese man Balsa had seen in Tsuram had put her on edge; she remembered her nervousness now.

The Yogoese man was still speaking. "If it's chuyal, then she'll be weak for a day even after she wakes up. The first day's effects are always the worst. She'll probably be able to speak, but I doubt she'll be able to move much. Chuyal is good to use for interrogations."

Balsa knew immediately that the man was right. She could listen and open her eyes, and she felt like she could probably speak, but getting up and moving around was out of the question. She almost wished she were unconscious again; the inability to move while she was awake was absolutely terrifying. But because she was conscious, she decided to take in as much of her surroundings as possible.

She was stretched out flat on her back on something hard: maybe the floor, maybe a table for treating patients. When the man stopped

speaking, she heard a sort of glug-glug sound like water flowing in from somewhere. *Am I on a ship?* she thought. She couldn't feel waves moving against the floor or walls, though. She was probably at an inn or building very close to the harbor, directly on the ocean. She felt the presence of the Yogoese man standing over her and kept her eyes shut.

After a long, silent moment, she heard the man sit down beside her in a chair; its legs scraped over a wooden floor.

The man addressed someone—maybe her, maybe someone else inside the room—in a disparaging tone. "You're hopeless. What on earth did you even hope to gain?" His voice was quiet, but Balsa heard laughter in it. There was a reply from somewhere farther away; Balsa couldn't quite make it out. When the man next to her replied, he sounded irritated. "What did you say?! Say it again. You're too supportive and sentimental about that damned prince; don't try to deny it again. It's not like I don't watch you every day."

The man stood up from his chair; Balsa heard his footsteps as he crossed the room and left it. Balsa kept her eyes closed and tried to steady her rapidly increasing heartbeat. *That damned prince...Chagum?*

What did "too supportive and sentimental about Chagum" mean? Were these Chagum's allies, or his enemies? As she thought these words over in her mind, she caught the scent of cholu, a burning herb that was often used recreationally by sailors. She realized that the man who had picked her up before had also smelled like cholu. The realization helped her focus; she still had a horrible headache, but her thoughts were getting clearer.

She suddenly identified the voice she hadn't recognized earlier: the mysterious man was the same magic weaver she'd encountered on Red-Eyed Yuzan's ship. He was also the one who had managed to get Yuzan's brother Rago to talk about the Talfa necklace. Balsa had tied him up and left him in the shipwright's hut near the harbor, but she hadn't killed him. Apparently his friends had found him.

It was possible that the magic weaver was the same man she'd seen when she'd infiltrated Tsuram's black market—the one who was also

looking for Chagum.

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Balsa still didn't have a full grasp of what was going on. The four guards who had attacked her at the tavern had worn lord Suan's family crest. Maybe lord Suan had ordered them to bring in or eliminate anyone who was asking questions about Chagum, but she had a feeling this situation wasn't quite that simple. Why would a lord bother to poison her food? Would he really involve himself in this situation that far? Balsa doubted he'd been trying to kill her; all the poison had done was make her lose consciousness. And he'd poisoned his own guards, too—at least, guards who worked in his palace.

It seemed logical to assume that the other guards' collapse was the signal for lord Suan's personal guards to attack her. The poison seemed to affect the drunkest men first, starting with the youngest man present. Balsa had an uneasy feeling about all of this, and not just because the Yogoese man whose footsteps she'd been dogging was also after Chagum. There were pieces to this puzzle that she understood, but when she tried to make all the pieces fit, the picture was hopelessly jumbled and complicated.

There were two possibilities: either lord Suan had taken Chagum captive after learning that he was the crown prince of a foreign nation, or he'd sped Chagum on his way to speak to the King of Rota. Of the two options, the first seemed likeliest, but she also didn't know what lord Suan stood to gain by holding Chagum captive. Red-Eyed Yuzan and the mysterious magic weaver were also mixed up in this situation somehow, but she didn't know enough to hazard a guess. She knew that they'd taken her away from lord Suan's men before she could be captured and questioned.

A chill went up Balsa's spine. An alarming number of people seemed to know that Chagum was alive.

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Balsa heard the sound of someone's footsteps approaching the room where she lay, still pretending to be asleep. She heard the man sit down again, but he wasn't near her. She heard a sound like the scratching of a pen moving across paper. A shadow fell across her face.

"You're awake, aren't you?" the man asked. "The rhythm of your breathing changed." His voice was low and deep.

Balsa opened her eyes. Just as she'd thought, the man was the same one she'd seen while investigating the whereabouts of the Talfa necklace. He looked to be in his late twenties, but he might also be older; it was difficult to tell. He was definitely younger than she'd expected. His features were sharp like a blade and his expression was wary, but she thought she saw the beginnings of a smile around his mouth. Like his youth, there was a softness to him that she hadn't expected. She wondered if he used that quality to draw people in.

When Balsa saw that he was holding her spear out to her, she breathed an entirely audible sigh of relief. He smiled and brought her spear closer.

"I snuck into the inn you were staying at originally and grabbed this. I've been wondering what you've been looking for ever since I passed you by in that underground jeweler's hideout. I happen to know who you are. I travel a lot and love hearing songs and stories from other nations. ‘The Song of the Water Spirit and the Crown Prince' is one I've heard many, many times."

The man thunked the butt of her spear onto the floor and performed a mock salute. "You've been indiscreet, Balsa the spear wielder. Even a child would be able to figure out who you are."

Part 2 - Enemies Among Friends

Chapter 1 - Allies and Enemies

The peaks of the Misty Blue Mountains were covered in a fine layer of white snow. Villages and towns near the mountains had a hard frost overnight; they shone white from above in the bright light of the morning.

The council meeting held between the Mikado, Gakai and Army General Radou was as frigid and intense as the atmosphere outside. The Mikado surveyed the members of his council with a gravely serious expression, then said to Radou, "How prepared is the army for the impending invasion?"

Army General Radou was sweating profusely. He glanced sidelong at the man sitting next to him: his brother Karyou. Karyou was also a general in New Yogo's army, second-in-command only to Radou himself. There was little family resemblance between them at all; looking at them side-by-side, it was difficult to believe they were brothers. Their personalities differed almost as much as their appearances. Radou liked to intimidate others with both his face and his boomingly loud voice and wore all of his emotions on his sleeve. In contrast, Karyou was a stern-looking man whose hair had just started going gray; he almost never showed any hint of emotion in his face or in his voice.

Karyou unwrapped a scroll that he was holding in his hand. "Forgive me for imposing, Your Imperial Majesty, but I have been tasked with handling the preparations for our land and sea forces in recent weeks. Please allow me to update this council on the current state of our forces."

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After Sangal's pacification by Talsh became clear, the Mikado and Army General Radou had crafted a defense plan. The first step had been to fortify Kosenkyo and areas around the city, which meant that choke points and fortifications had been made at critical places on New Yogo's border and along all of the roads leading into the capital. These fortifications were built relatively quickly, but keeping them all manned was a struggle; there simply weren't enough troops. Looking at the Mikado's plan from the outside, it seemed quite solid, but it had obvious weak points.

The most obvious was that even if the fortifications were sufficient to protect Kosenkyo, everything to the south of it would be swallowed up in Talsh's initial invasion. Fortifying the roads meant that fewer people in the army were available for other tasks, which also meant that supplies and information traveled more slowly. The Mikado also couldn't conscript every able-bodied man for the army; people needed to remain in the fields to keep growing food and bringing in the harvest, otherwise the army would starve, as would the rest of New Yogo's people. If New Yogo lost the harvest in the southern part of the nation when the war started, the entire war effort would be in serious trouble. The northern and central sections of the country didn't grow enough food to support themselves.

Army General Radou said the same thing about all such obvious weaknesses: "The Mikado is the soul of the nation. No matter how much land we lose, the first priority must be to protect the Mikado and preserve the imperial capital. There is no need to fortify the entire nation against invasion. If there aren't enough hands to do the work, call in others from distant places. Let us proudly display our preparations and hold our heads high."

However, letting the Talsh know about their war plans and the weaknesses inherent in them would be a grave blunder. It was vital that the entire country appeared to be protected and fortified before the Talsh navy arrived. That was why the borders were locked down so severely, and why the penalty for crossing them was so harsh. No information could be permitted to leak to the enemy. Radou had also

insisted that spies be sent to Sangal and Talsh to report back on their plans and movements.

All in all, a year and a few months had gone by since the initial implementation of this plan. The fortification of Kosenkyo continued, but was not yet complete. Fortifications were being built along all of New Yogo's borders, including the critical southern one. Men had been conscripted from all over the nation to work as builders and fight as soldiers in the coming war—but compared to the forces that Sangal and Talsh could send to invade, New Yogo's military might was paltry at best.

As Karyou explained the current situation in overly polite language, Shuga felt his heart turning to ice from terror. He couldn't move. While Karyou did speak politely, he didn't share his brother's belief that the Mikado was the soul of the nation and should be the only thing that the army protected. He reported the facts, even when they reflected unfavorably on New Yogo's war efforts. Shuga understood that the forces currently assembled might be sufficient to hold off two or three attacks, but after that, New Yogo would inevitably fall to the Talsh. Their numbers were an advantage that was too great to overcome.

Karyou's voice echoed loudly in the otherwise silent hall. "According to our spies in Sangal, the rakkaral were much stronger and more numerous than usual. It seems that Talsh won't be able to send Sangal's navy many reinforcements by sea this year. The first battle will almost certainly take place on New Yogo's border with Sangal. The forces mustered there amount to upwards of sixty thousand men. We should send as many men as can be spared there as quickly as possible."

A government official sitting to Karyou's right raised his hand. After the Mikado gave him permission to speak, he said, "Is it really advisable to send farmers and shopkeepers to the front line, when many of them never even held a sword before a few months ago? The enemy forces will certainly make short work of them."

Karyou waited for the government official to stop speaking, then said, "That is precisely what the enemy will expect, and that is why we

will be at an advantage. Our aim is to stop the war with this single battle. If the enemy looks down on us, they will underestimate us, and that will be the source of our triumph. Give a man a sword, or a spear, and ask him to defend his home, and he will do it. Why else did we conscript these men if we don't expect them to fight? And if they do wind up scattering, the veterans will be behind them. They will have still lured the enemy deeper into our territory, making it more difficult for the enemy to escape."

The government official who had asked the question nodded his head in understanding. Shuga looked at Karyou with a haunted expression. He hated his strategy. Even if it won the war, countless innocent people would be dead. He saw no greater meaning in such a sacrifice; it was wasteful and cruel.

Calling for reinforcements and holding a defensive position until they arrived made a lot more sense to Shuga as a strategy. But New Yogo hadn't called on any other nations for reinforcements. For better or worse, the country was attempting to weather this invasion crisis alone. Time was on Talsh's side; they had no need to rush. They could afford to pick at New Yogo bit by bit until all their defenses and resources were exhausted. Next year, they wouldn't have any problem sending in fresh troops from the southern continent, and then the war would essentially be over.

No matter how many men New Yogo conscripted, virtually none of them were soldiers. They had no time to become skilled fighters, either—and every battle would mean more lives lost. Everyone in this hall must surely know that—but no one said it aloud.

Shuga wondered if anyone here believed that Army General Radou's plan would actually work. It took a lot of soldiers simply to defend the fortifications, but those weren't all that needed defending if New Yogo was going to win. There didn't seem to be a way to win using his strategies. All he was trying to do was to help New Yogo resist invasion for as long as possible.

Shuga couldn't stop thinking about the traitor in their midst. Despite all of Army General Radou's precautions, Shuga knew that someone in this room was likely passing information to the Talsh empire. He covered his eyes with one hand. *All we're doing here is wasting time.*

It was at this moment that Shuga remembered something critical. People are strange creatures. Usually, people embark on the path to their future through some determination or hard work, but never really think about how far they had to go once they've achieved their goals. And yet, step by step, the future is made. Shuga's memory was of something that had shaped and influenced him forever afterwards...but he didn't know if he should trust it. Still, he had no time to hesitate.

Shuga lifted his head and gazed at all the assembled officials in the chamber. Karyou locked eyes with him. There was nothing particularly threatening or interested in his gaze, but Shuga still sensed something like caution coming from him. He frowned slightly. Why would Karyou be cautious of him? Had he noticed that Shuga was about to speak? Did he intend to interrupt him? Shuga knew Karyou to be a perceptive man. He was, after all, unlike his brother in almost every respect.

Shuga rolled up the scroll in his hand, then raised it. He faced the Mikado dead on and said, "Excuse me. May I speak?"

Everyone in the chamber turned toward Shuga. The Mikado acknowledged him with a nod. "I have seen a new portent in the heavens," he said, clearly and distinctly. "I feel I must share my knowledge and understanding of it, Your Imperial Majesty."

The Mikado frowned at him. Many of the collected officials in the room exchanged worried glances. Star Readers were supposed to bring their reports on the state of the heavens to the Mikado first, before anyone else heard them. The Mikado was the one who chose what information to share with the people and the officials who served him. What Shuga was proposing to do went against all norms and conventions.

Shuga continued speaking before he could be interrupted. "It is the responsibility of Star Readers to read what the heavens say and convey

it to Your Imperial Majesty to determine the import and meaning of what is read. I would like to share this portent before further judgments are made in matters of war. I would of course have brought this to Your Imperial Majesty much sooner, but I only very recently learned of it. I attended this council meeting in order to share what I have seen."

The Mikado shifted his gaze toward Gakai, who had turned bright red with fury.

Gakai had been summoned to the Mikado's side two days before and hadn't returned to the Star Palace since answering the summons. Shuga undid the ties of the scroll he held, partially revealing the portent that he'd discovered and read in Gakai's absence.

The Mikado looked from Gakai, who was still red-faced, to Shuga. He frowned. "What new portent has appeared?"

Shuga bowed. "As Your Imperial Majesty is well aware, deciding on the meaning of a portent is not simple to do in the span of only a few days. All interpretations have a bearing on all the others that have been made in past years, especially in the last six months. Reading this portent in the context of all the others has proved complex. I believe this portent has appeared now specifically in reaction to our current military situation. "

Shuga unfurled the scroll in his hand and displayed it for the Mikado to see. A map was drawn on the scroll in gold ink that caught the light of the lamps, and in the center, a strange symbol graph that looked like a star chart. As the Mikado looked it over, Shuga said, "I will explain the meaning of this portent as best I can. I have consulted with my fellow Master Star Readers in this matter, and we believe that this portent heralds a time of great change for our nation."

The gathered officials all started speaking loudly among themselves. The Mikado stared through Shuga, still frowning, like he was trying to discover whether or not Shuga was telling the truth.

"I understand why the appearance of this portent seems so sudden," Shuga said. "The timing seemed suspicious, even to me and my fellow

Star Readers, but I believe that other events in recent years have been building to this portent of great change," Shuga said with his eyes cast down. "The portent itself may be interpreted as a crossroads. Taking one path will lead to one future. Taking the other will lead to a completely different one. Regardless of the path chosen, the portent indicates that old things shall be swept away to make way for the new."

The officials standing around Shuga looked like they'd just been struck with a whip. They fell silent. All eyes fell on Shuga.

"The choice of which path to follow falls to you, Your Imperial Majesty." Shuga's cheeks felt stiff from nerves. His eyes shone with a bright inner light.

The collected officials understood that the future of the nation—and the Mikado's ultimate decisions in this council—depended completely on what Shuga had to say.

"The current path leads to the soaking of our land in the people's blood. It has always been the Mikado who guides us away from such sad and tragic outcomes. I believe in Your Imperial Majesty's ability to guide us correctly, as you always have."

The Mikado said nothing for a while. Shuga stared straight at him, no longer keeping his eyes cast down. The Mikado felt a growing sense of anger at Shuga's brazen disrespect.

"You are saying that the other path is to avoid war," the Mikado said. "That's what you want, isn't it?"

Shuga held himself still as he answered, "I am an apprentice of the Holy Sage. It is not my place to decide what path should be taken. War is not upon us yet; the portent appeared before any fighting began. I find its dual nature significant partly for that reason. All I wish is for Your Imperial Majesty to have all the facts when making decisions."

There was a rustling of silk in the otherwise silent hall as the Mikado stood up from his jeweled throne. The assembled officials looked at the Mikado in shock.

"So...you are a coward," the Mikado said. "Do you fear death?"

The Mikado looked away from Shuga; his eyes swept the room, resting on all the officials' faces. He spoke in a voice full of emotion: "My ancestors fled from the war-torn southern continent, where impure and impious nations devoured one another like beasts. New Yogo is not a nation formed in the image of those others; we receive direct guidance from Ten no Kami. Would anyone say that our nation is not pure and perfect due to the god's guidance and long years of peace?"

Tears fell silently down the Mikado's cheeks. No one made a sound. The Mikado, usually reserved and completely calm, was openly weeping and shaking from head to toe.

"I believe in the pure heart of my father, the God of Heaven. He would never abandon his child at such a time of terrible need. I believe with my entire heart that Ten no Kami will save us."

Tears dripped down the Mikado's face and onto the floor. He made no move to wipe them away.

"Are all of you afraid to die? Are you really so against the idea of defending our nation, even to the last man? Would you prefer me to kneel before the corrupt lords of the south and let our beloved country pass into their filthy hands?"

Some of the collected officials started crying as well. Shuga saw men, especially high-ranking military officials, clenching and unclenching their hands as they attempted to calm themselves. These were some of the most vital council members present: they had the authority to command New Yogo's armies into any danger. Almost all of their cheeks were wet.

"Mikado," some muttered. "Emperor..."

General Radou stood up and said in a voice like a shout: "We, too, love this nation with all our hearts, Your Imperial Majesty. No one here would think to deliver it into the hands of our enemies. We will fight to the death to repel them, without fear or regret. Ten no Kami has blessed us." He paused. "Yes, let us fight! Fight! Fight to the last man! Our army is protected by Ten no Kami! The betrayers of Sangal and corrupt Talsh forces don't stand a chance against us!"

Shuga heard resounding shouts of agreement from all around the chamber. He cast his eyes down.

The Mikado spoke slowly, still weeping. "I choose the path of purity for our nation. I beg you all: believe in me."

Every man present knelt down and brought their forehead to the floor.

The Mikado declared the end of the council session. Men rose from their knees and called out to their neighbors. Shuga drew himself up swiftly and made his way out of the chamber into the dim hallway outside. No one called out to him when he left.

"It's so unfortunate that the future is truly so certain and set. I understand that we must rely on Ten no Kami, but you and the Master Star Readers must have seen this portent for a reason."

Shuga turned around to look at who had spoken to him. His expression was pained and mildly regretful. Shuga had expected some people in the hall to address him with contempt; it wasn't a Star Reader's place to decide matters as important as the future course of the nation. But this man—

Is he the traitor? Did he take the bait?

Shuga turned into a side-corridor that led back to the Star Palace. He felt someone following him, getting closer. His pursuer was Karyou, Army General Radou's brother. He clasped a scroll over his heart. When Shuga faced him, he nodded in greeting.

Karyou whispered so that he wouldn't be easily overheard. "I'd like to speak to you, lord Shuga. Meet me at the palace's sacred site tomorrow morning at dawn."

Shuga felt himself trembling all over. *The traitor is lord Karyou?!*

He'd never expected his bait to entice the likes of Karyou Yugaraku. Shuga watched his figure recede in the crowd as Karyou walked quickly away from him.

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The next morning, Shuga stood in a grove of trees near the imperial palace's most sacred and holy site. The air was thick with the smell of bark and leaves. Shuga had traded duties with another Master Star Reader the previous night to ensure that he wouldn't miss this meeting.

He had arrived early to draw sacred water from a clear spring and pray. The most sacred site in the palace was not a temple, but a large mound of earth covered by a large hexagonal roof. There were no statues or decorations adorning the space. Small windows had been cut into the roof to allow the sunshine in. Shuga watched the light of early dawn creeping over the sacred site and waited.

When earth and water combine, life is formed, he thought. *Everything the gods have made comes from the water of the heavens and the foundation of the earth. It seems so simple, but I think that's the truth.*

Shuga looked at the sunlight dancing over the earth and prayed. *This place is holy. I feel very much like I am one with the world in this place.*

Shuga stood up slowly and faced the Mikado's palace. It was dawn. He left the sacred site and walked behind it, toward an artificial hill that marked the edge of the Mikado's garden. It was still too early for the gardeners to come and tend the space, so everything was quiet and deserted. The morning air felt cool as he walked along the artificial hill with dew rising around his ankles.

There was a man standing behind an artificial boulder near the bottom of the artificial hill: lord Karyou. He was alone, but he carried a short sword. He gave off a completely different impression than he had the day before, when he'd seemed to be as cold and emotionless as a pillar of ice: now, Shuga thought he detected a note of honest fear in his expression.

Karyou was past fifty years old, but the only sign of it was the slight graying of hair at his temples. He suddenly seemed much younger than his brother, despite the relatively small gap between their ages.

Huh. I wonder if anyone has ever thought that Karyou, the Lieutenant-General of New Yogo's armies, looked young and scared before.

"You came. Thank you," Karyou said with a smile.

"I'm not sure why you wanted to meet in such an out-of-the-way place," Shuga said, "but yes, I'm here." He tilted his head at Karyou, making no attempt to conceal his confusion. "Please tell me what you'd like to discuss."

Karyou nodded and started speaking quietly. They were partially blocked from view by the boulder he'd hidden behind, but the trees to the opposite side were sparse; they would be able to see anyone trying to sneak up on them easily. Anyone approaching from the direction of the hill would also be visible as they descended. There seemed to be little chance of them being observed or interrupted.

"Crown Prince Chagum's motives and intentions were widely known inside the palace," Karyou said. "He must have written down many of

those motives and intentions in the letter he sent to you. I hardly think you're entirely ignorant of my intentions."

I see. So Karyou knows about all of that as well? I should have expected as much. I have to be very careful here.

Karyou grinned. "Crown Prince Chagum was a brave hero. It's a shame he died so young. With him gone, our nation's fate seems sealed. If only he'd returned safely from Sangal, maybe more people would have realized that."

"What do you mean, ‘our nation's fate seems sealed?' Do you believe New Yogo will fall to the Talsh empire?"

"Of course. Isn't it obvious?" he replied without an instant of hesitation.

Shuga looked at him with trepidation. His smile collapsed.

"Crown Prince Chagum is dead. I am the Lieutenant-General of our armies and must consider the reign of the next Mikado. Is it so surprising that I've been in contact with our nation's enemies?"

"No."

Karyou's eyes glinted like steel. "I see you understand. As Lieutenant-General, I have a firm grasp on our communication network and can easily acquire news from Talsh. I'll know before anyone else about any incoming attacks."

Karyou stared at Shuga. "You've been wary of me for a long time. I knew about your own information campaign, using merchants from Sangal and Talsh to pass information into the country. You and I think alike, I think."

Shuga took in everything Karyou was saying silently, just listening. A shaft of morning sunlight filtered through the trees above them and shone directly into Karyou's eyes; he looked down.

"This country is on the knife edge between destruction and salvation," Karyou said. He raised his eyes to look at Shuga again.

"Do you not believe in the power of Ten no Kami's protection?" Shuga asked.

Karyou tilted his head slightly. "Do you believe in it?"

Shuga didn't answer.

Karyou kept talking as if his answer didn't matter. "Ten no Kami watches over this world—that's all he does. When earthquakes strike, or floods wash villages away, or people murder one another, the god simply watches and does nothing. I believe in Ten no Kami, but I'm not like my brother. I'm not expecting some kind of last-minute miracle to save us.

"You must believe something similar, right? Otherwise you would never have presented that star portent the way you did."

Shuga was shaken to the core. Karyou had been the one whispering in his brother's ear this entire time. He was in charge of logistical details and organizing their defenses. Shuga had never expected him to think so similarly to himself—it was almost as shocking as learning he'd turned traitor.

Karyou smiled at him. "The sacred has, perhaps, less meaning to men like me. I'm thirty years older than you, and served the previous Mikado as well as this one. I expect I'll serve the next one, as well.

"I also must consider my niece's future. She is a bit foolish and strong-willed, like my brother. Her image will need burnishing if her brother is to be made the next Mikado, to protect her reputation as well as his."

"You are more considerably more honest than I was expecting," Shuga said.

Karyou shrugged. "Is there any reason I shouldn't speak honestly with you?"

"Aren't you concerned that I might report what you've said to the Mikado?"

Karyou laughed. "You've always been an honest sort. And you're right. You could very well have spoken out yesterday to lure me into some kind of trap so that I'd ruin my own reputation. But what would you have to gain by that? The Holy Sage is in no position to perform his duties. Crown Prince Chagum is gone. You won't hold on to your

position long by making more enemies. Besides, even if you did report me to the Mikado, who do you think he'd believe? Me or you?"

Karyou looked at Shuga with a composed smile. "Lord Shuga—aren't you also considering how to save our country's people from being needlessly slaughtered? The current strategy will lead to nothing but ruin. Just look at Sangal; they've been completely taken over in just two short years. And they cooperated from the start and received the best possible treatment. It's foolish, reckless, and cruel to have us all fight to the last man. We'd be destroying everything that makes our nation worth fighting for. I think the Talsh understand that, too."

"So you would save the body of this country by sacrificing its soul?" Shuga asked,

Karyou shook his head slowly.

"The Mikado is not the soul of this country. It's the people. And I must think of my nephew's future."

"I see," Shuga said coldly. "You saw the tears on everyone's faces yesterday, didn't you? They were moved to tears by nothing more than the Mikado's words. It seems that the country's soul is something that's beyond your ability to understand."

Karyou nodded. "That's why I need you, lord Shuga. The coming days will certainly bring a great deal of change, but the outcome of that change won't be destruction. I intend to see that our people thrive. The Star Readers are the ones who guide the Mikado in determining the correct course for the nation. This isn't something I can do without your help. I don't intend to deceive or betray anyone. When I heard you describe the portent you'd seen yesterday, it was like the voice of the heavens was speaking to me. A portent of great change, where old things will be swept away in favor of a new future. That's what I want for New Yogo."

Karyou paused for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice was quieter. "The Mikado and my brother's plan won't achieve that. Their strategy will result in our army being decimated and the survivors being made into Talsh slaves. Would you rather have that, or preserve

our nation as best we can in its current state, with the son of the Mikado ruling after him?"

Shuga looked down and considered. Birds twittered in the branches of a tree above his head. He could hear them calling to one another clearly, as if they were sitting right on his shoulders. Morning light cut through the trees and shone on Shuga's down-turned face. Before he could reply to Karyou's question, Karyou spoke again: "You can't possibly hold out hope for an alliance with Rota. I know Crown Prince Chagum proposed such an idea before he departed for Sangal, but the Mikado would never agree to such a course of action."

Shuga blinked.

"Isn't that right?" Karyou asked.

"Yes," Shuga said, "unfortunately."

Karyou smiled bitterly. "Besides, Rota isn't in the best position to help us right now, anyway. Their kingdom is divided. I'm sure the southern clan lords would love to find some way to weaken the king's power; sending men to help us would almost certainly weaken the royal family's position. Your spies have likely told you this already, but the southern lords have been bought and paid for by the Talsh for quite a while. It's only a matter of time before Rota falls to them as well."

Shuga felt goosebumps crawling up his arms. "How do they intend to accomplish that?"

Karyou shrugged. "The same way they did Sangal, by putting pressure on markets and cutting off supplies from the south. The southern lords control almost all the wealth in Rota, so they'd be the ones most harmed by such a strategy. It's in their best interests to cooperate with Talsh as much as possible. The Island Guardians of Sangal were also primarily motivated by greed. That was Sangal's undoing. I happen to know the Talsh Emperor's first son has been trying to get the King of Rota to open Tsuram harbor to trade with the Talsh empire for many years."

Shuga's eyebrows drew together. "Not the Second Prince, Raul?"

Karyou nodded. "It looks like Second Prince Raul doesn't have his father's backing for invading the northern continent. Hazar, the First Prince, seems to have that right. Prince Raul is attempting to conquer New Yogo to gain a foothold and sweep over the remainder of the continent before his brother conquers Rota—and his brother is attempting to conquer Rota so that he can conquer the continent before that can happen. It's obvious that they're working at cross purposes," he said in a slightly cynical tone.

"Do you intend to use their infighting in some way?" Shuga asked.

Karyou didn't answer immediately. He smiled a little. "I would use any advantage and any tool available to save our nation. I believe our best chance for a positive future for everyone lies with Prince Raul. I would throw away my station and my pride along with everything I own to achieve such an outcome."

Shuga took in Karyou's smile with a grimace. I wonder if he intends to kill his brother as well as the Mikado, Shuga thought. He'll have to, if he wants to hand the country over to Prince Raul. Shuga didn't want to believe Karyou was capable of such an act, but he considered the possibility likely. If his brother and the Mikado were dead, he would be the highest-ranking official close to the Crown Prince. His own power would increase dramatically.

But were Karyou's intentions really so cruel and self-serving? It was difficult to tell from his rhetoric. He seemed to sincerely believe that Prince Raul would set the nation on the right path and save it from being destroyed.

Shuga looked Karyou in the eyes and said, "So Talsh intends to use Rota to betray us as Sangal did, yet still desires a peaceful conquest? The only way the southern lords would agree to such a thing is if they got something in return—perhaps the right to govern our nation? Or a higher standing within Talsh?"

Karyou nodded calmly. "Yes, if Prince Hazar wins. And he might. Moe than half of Rota might as well be under Talsh rule already. It may be

that the Talsh will conquer Rota before they conquer us, which will put us in an even worse position."

The sun brightened suddenly as if it had just emerged from behind a cloud. Sunshine made the dewdrops around Shuga's feet sparkle. Shuga breathed in and smelled fresh clean earth. Shuga stood still in the full light of the morning and thought of Crown Prince Chagum. He had crossed the sea alone in pursuit of an alliance with Rota, but it seemed his dream of a peaceful and cooperative future had been impossible from the start. Shuga held out no hope of an alliance with Rota.

But that didn't mean Shuga had given up on saving New Yogo. Far from it. No help was coming. He had to step up now, for the good of the nation. He didn't know how; his path was still shrouded in darkness. He still felt that he had to try—for Crown Prince Chagum's sake.

Chapter 2 - Strange Foes

"This is a lot heavier than it looks," the man said. Balsa's spear wobbled in his hand.

Balsa stared at him silently. He was close enough that she could reach out and snatch her spear away from him, but her limbs were still too numb and heavy to move.

"Who are you?" Balsa asked. "Why did you save me back there?"

The man shifted her spear slightly in his grip, causing it to scrape across the floor. "My name is Hugo Arayutan. As for why I saved you...that's complicated."

Hugo crossed the room with Balsa's spear in one hand and pulled a key from his pocket with the other. He locked the door.

Balsa frowned. What kind of room locked with a key from the *inside*?

Hugo propped Balsa's spear against the side of the door, then walked over to a low table. He picked something up from the table, then came back to her and sat down in a chair. The distinctive smell of cholu reached Balsa's nose; he was packing it into a pipe. After he lit the pipe, sweet-smelling smoke filled the room.

"There now. No one can disturb us, so we can talk for as long as we like." He observed Balsa's distrustful expression, then added, "The man you knocked out is a decent sort, but he has a bad habit of not trusting me." He sighed. "I met him when I was seventeen. He's treated me like a kid ever since. I'd rather not have him butting in until he's needed. It's safer for all of us this way." His tone was vaguely fond.

Balsa stared right at Hugo and remained silent.

She had no idea who Hugo was or what he wanted. She only knew that he had the advantage over her: all the cards were in his hands. She wanted to be able to see through him—to understand what he intended to do with the cards he held.

"You have a strange accent," she muttered.

Hugo's lips twitched upward in a smile. "Almost sounds like I'm not from the northern continent, maybe?"

Balsa's eyes widened. "You're—from Yogo?"

Hugo nodded. "I was born in the kingdom of Yogo on the southern continent. Talsh conquered and subjugated it when I was a boy."

A chill went up Balsa's spine.

It's like I thought. He's a Talsh spy. The Talsh know that Chagum is alive.

"This harbor is chock-full of Talsh spies," Hugo went on, as if he was trying to confirm Balsa's worst fears. "There's a rumor that lord Suan's son got his hands on a Talfa necklace. That seems like a good lead, don't you agree?"

Balsa remained silent. Why would Hugo reveal such a thing to her? He gave her no time to think; he was still speaking.

"Crown Prince Chagum's escape from the ship was discovered as soon as the ship docked on the Sangal peninsula. Talsh sent spies everywhere to look for him. When I heard the summons, I froze. I didn't think Crown Prince Chagum would take such a terrible risk."

Hugo was looking straight into Balsa's eyes when he said, "Crown Prince Chagum tried to kill himself when I captured him. He almost died in front of me."

Balsa held her breath and maintained eye contact. *Who the hell is this guy?* The revelation that Chagum had attempted to kill himself gave Balsa nothing but pain.

"It was a brave act, but also foolish and naive. Still, I understand why he chose to flee the ship. He's willing to risk any amount of damage to his person or his pride to ensure that the people of New Yogo are saved."

Hugo hung his head for a few moments. When he raised it again, he was smiling slightly. "I thought he would accept Talsh's deal for that reason—to save his people. I thought they broke his will enough to

make him surrender. But he wasn't broken after all. He's a stubborn one —"

"—shut up," Balsa cut in. She couldn't stand to listen to Hugo anymore.

Hugo blinked at her in surprise. "Huh?"

"You're a Talsh spy," Balsa said. "That means you're my enemy. I'm sure that gloating about your plans and how clever you've been is fun for you, but I don't find it amusing. You pretending to be a friend makes my skin crawl. So cut past all that and give me a reason why you're telling me all of this."

Hugo passed his hand over his face. "Well, when you're right, you're right. I can't fault you for being perceptive." He rubbed his chin and was lost in thought for a few moments. "It's true that I'm a Talsh spy, so I must seem like your enemy, when viewed through that lens. But the situation is a lot more nuanced than that: not everything is black and white. I understand that my speaking to you as I've done makes you uncomfortable, but I'm still going to ask you to hear me out."

"And why would I do that?" Balsa asked softly. "You said before that your reason for saving me was complicated, and that the situation is nuanced. We're not equals in this conversation. Unless you answer a direct question and explain your reasons, complex or not, there's no point in us talking."

Hugo grinned wryly. "You're right again." He smoothed his expression and went on, "I told you before that Tsuram is crawling with Talsh spies. That's true, but they're not all working for the same person."

"But aren't they all working for Talsh?" Balsa asked.

"Yes, but some work for the First Prince Hazar and others work for the Second Prince, Raul. The brothers are more or less enemies, so the spies are pretty much always getting in one another's' way." Hugo smiled faintly and continued, "Anyway, I work for Prince Raul. I'm an officer in the northern army, which is called the Hokuyoku. Prince

Hazar's spies serve in the southern army, called the Nanyoku. The man who poisoned you was one of Prince Hazar's spies."

Balsa frowned at this unexpected revelation. "Huh? Why?"

"You were mistaken for one of our spies," Hugo said. "It's easy to see why. You were hanging around lord Suan's guards, asking about Crown Prince Chagum. That's highly suspicious." He smiled. "The fact that I saved you probably confirmed their suspicions. If they didn't know you were part of the northern army before, they'll definitely think you are now."

"But the men who surrounded me where lord Suan's guards," Balsa said.

The cholu in Hugo's pipe was running short. He quashed the small flame with his thumb. "Lord Suan is in league with the Talsh empire. He has been for at least two years."

Balsa's eyes widened in sudden realization. She'd learned about the political rift between the northern and southern clan lords when she'd rescued Asra from the Kashal; she tried to remember all the details now. The southern lords had almost caused an uprising at Rota's founding ceremony.

Hugo kept speaking while Balsa was thinking. "Prince Hazar knows that Prince Raul is after New Yogo, so he set his eyes on Rota. The southern clan lords have always been dissatisfied with the king's rule. Prince Hazar seized on that and is using it to its full advantage. The southern lords have lost access to their trade partners in Sangal because of the war, but that wouldn't matter as much if they could do business directly with the Talsh. They're a greedy bunch, these southern lords.

"Lord Suan is probably the worst of the lot, though. Talsh convinced him first. He's been gathering up troops and resources for years to prepare. I know he has some kind of secret agreement with the Talsh—and most of the spies I've talked to know that he and the southern lords intend to get themselves installed at the new rulers of Rota after Talsh conquers and subjugates it."

Balsa was starting to understand the whole situation a lot more clearly. The rationale given for both Talsh and the southern lords made a lot of sense. She also understood why Hugo had told her that the situation was complicated. Prince Hazar, understandably, wouldn't want his brother's spies interfering with his plans in Rota. She understood all that, but she still trembled finely, shivering with cold—and the shivering kept getting worse. It was becoming difficult to focus.

If Chagum walked into lord Suan's palace without knowing all this, then he walked into a fight, unprepared...

Hugo watched Balsa's face go white. "Lord Suan learned from Nanyoku spies that his son had gotten his hands on a Talfa necklace," Hugo said. "Imagine his surprise when Crown Prince Chagum, the source of the Talfa necklace itself, appeared on his very doorstep."

Balsa frowned and thought, *He was dressed like a Rassharou when he arrived, wasn't he? Why would lord Suan's guards just let him through like that?*

"I heard that the guards chased him off when he tried to enter the palace," Hugo said. "But, by sheer luck, lord Suan's son was passing out of the gate at the exact same time he arrived. Lord Suan's son is unusually clever. He's also just as greedy as his father, so he jumped at the chance to buy a Talfa necklace.

"Lord Suan's son attended the coronation of Sangal's king some years back, so he'd seen Crown Prince Chagum before, unfortunately. I'm not sure how much of an impression Crown Prince Chagum made with such a brief acquaintance, but lord Suan's son did recognize him on sight."

Hugo looked at Balsa with a complicated expression. "Say...I've heard that Crown Prince Chagum was dressed as a fisherman when he arrived, but you heard he was dressed as a Rassharou. Right?"

Balsa didn't answer him. Hugo shrugged and kept talking.

"There was a Rassharou fisherman on the boat we were on that he took a liking to. He must have thought it was safer to travel with the

Rassharou people than with any Sangalese ship, with the war being what it is."

"Rassharou fisherwoman?" Balsa asked reflexively, before she could think.

"He met her on board a pirate ship on his way to the southern continent," Hugo said.

Balsa felt like a fire had just caught and flared up brightly in her mind. All the pieces that she knew were converging and forming into one large, connected mass. She fixed Hugo with a withering stare. "I see. So you're the spy who captured Chagum, huh?"

The persistent smile in Hugo's eyes flickered and flashed out. He shrugged, then said. "Yep. I captured him. Good guess." He remained silent for a few moments. Balsa heard a candle spluttering on a desk across the room. Hugo was about to say something when someone tried to open the door of the room from the outside.

"Oi, why is this door locked? Open up!"

It was the voice of the short, slight magic weaver that Balsa had heard earlier. Hugo's eyebrows went up. He smiled at Balsa. "You shouldn't butt your head in where you're not wanted," he shouted through the door. He stood up and faced the door.

"I still need to talk to you," the magic weaver said. "Maybe you'll want to kill me when I'm done, but I still insist that you hear me out." His words were serious, but his tone was relatively light.

Hugo crossed the room and unlocked the door. The magic weaver glanced between Hugo and Balsa. "You..."

"Let's take this up outside," Hugo said. He prepared to leave, but then turned back toward Balsa. "You should only feel numb like that tonight. I'll bring a doctor in to help you later." He left the room and shut the door. Balsa heard the door lock from the outside.

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Balsa stared at the dim walls of the room around her.

I wonder if Chagum is still in lord Suan's palace.

If lord Suan was cooperating with the Talsh, then he probably wouldn't allow Chagum to contact the King of Rota. Chagum might still be in the palace, confined but not dead; lord Suan wouldn't kill such a valuable hostage now that New Yogo was just about to go to war.

Balsa closed her eyes tightly. Remembering that Chagum had tried to kill himself to avoid capture wrenched her heart. He'd made it all the way here safely, only to fall immediately into the hands of the Talsh again. Rage like the stirring embers of a fire flared up in Balsa's chest. She would make Talsh pay for any harm that came to Chagum.

Chapter 3 - Attack

The day passed slowly. Strength returned to Balsa's limbs by degrees; she shook out her hands and legs to banish the lingering numbness. A poor woman came to attend on her and check her over for injuries; aside from her, Balsa saw only Hugo and the magic weaver he supposedly worked with.

Balsa managed to sit up with great difficultly and rest her back against the wall. This place didn't look like an inn or a home. Maybe it was some kind of warehouse or holding area. The room she was in was small and had no windows. She thought it looked like a nice, quiet spot for a murder. The candles on the desk near her were refreshed periodically, but aside from that the room wasn't lit.

When Balsa leaned down and brought her hands to the floor, she found the floor's surface to be gritty with sand or some other fine powder. She sniffed and smelled flour.

Definitely a warehouse, then. Hugo and the magic weaver must have rented it out before it could be fully cleaned out. The wall at her back was made of cool, smooth stone. She heard the sound of waves lapping against something nearby, but she heard nothing else. She took in her surroundings in complete silence and leaned her head against the wall.

There was a loud sound of knocking at the door. Balsa sat up. She heard footsteps and shouting voices as well as loud thunks like merchandise falling from shelves. Someone screamed.

Are we being attacked?

Hugo almost certainly had enemies. He'd said as much himself. Maybe the Nanyoku spies had found this location.

Balsa frowned as the smell of smoke reached her through the door. *And now they've set a fire...*

The sounds of fighting grew louder. Balsa crawled silently toward the raised platform that served as her bed and hid underneath it. She could move, but her arms and legs felt almost completely numb. She could do nothing but hide and hope that she didn't burn to death.

She felt a sudden shock like impact through the floor that made her grit her teeth. She felt the shock directly in her jaw, since her head still felt too heavy to lift.

"Shit," Balsa breathed. She supported herself on her elbows and crawled toward her spear, which was on the other side of the room. If she could use her spear to support herself, maybe she could walk. She could at least try to block the attackers from opening the door that way. It was still locked, but if they beat against it enough she was sure they could break the door open.

She didn't know how long she'd be able to keep the door closed in her condition, but she had no choice but to try. She didn't have the key. She couldn't leave.

Balsa saw smoke streaking through the crack under the door, moving like a living thing as it spread across the floor and rose into the air. Balsa started coughing violently. Her chest and throat felt like they'd been pierced by something sharp.

When she finally picked up her spear and leaned against it with her back to the door, she heard footsteps again. There was a loud thunk against the lower part of the door; someone must have kicked it. The corners of the door emerged briefly from the doorframe before Balsa pushed it back into place, groaning with the effort.

So this is how I go, huh?

The door opened behind her, revealing Hugo. He lifted her up and started carrying her.

"Oi! Leave the woman behind. What's wrong with you?" a voice yelled from outside the room.

"Go ahead of me," Hugo called back. "I'll meet you at the usual place." Hugo carried Balsa out of the room and kicked the door closed behind him. He set Balsa down on the desk, then picked up the platform where

she'd been recovering and propped it up against the wall. There was a trapdoor beneath it.

Hugo lifted the trapdoor, revealing a staircase descending down into gloom. Fresh air wafted into the room from below, dispersing some of the smoke. Balsa wondered what the owners of the warehouse could have used such a place for—were there more goods hidden down below?

"Are you really gonna leave me behind?" Balsa asked Hugo as he started descending the stairs.

Hugo turned to face her and chuckled. There was a drawn short sword in one of his fists. He slipped silently down the stairs and disappeared.

Balsa heard more fighting, this time from the opening of the trapdoor. There was a loud twang like a bowstring being released; Hugo cried out. The sound of blades clashing echoed in the small room.

Even with the influx of fresh air from the trapdoor, the room continued to fill with smoke; it was becoming difficult to breathe again. Balsa gripped her spear and rolled from the desk to the ground, where she crouched down near the trapdoor.

Balsa crept down the stairs one by one, silently. She saw gleaming wet stones on the floor in front of her, along with moss and standing puddles of black water. On the far side of the room, she saw a man lying face-down. As she descended the steps, she realized that this area was some kind of sewage drain; there was a large sort of man-made river, and this was what the man was floating in.

Hugo was sitting directly next to the stairs with an arrow in his thigh.

"So they got you?" Balsa muttered.

Hugo looked up at Balsa. He was sweating profusely. "It's not bad," he said.

"You should probably take the arrow out," Balsa said.

Hugo shrugged his shoulders and frowned in irritation. "I know." He broke the shaft of the arrow, grunting in pain, but he didn't remove it. Balsa slid down the remaining steps one by one, using her spear for

support. She crawled closer to Hugo and realized he had more wounds than the one in his leg. His side had been cut open by a blade.

"That's the Hura river," Hugo said, pointing to the flowing water that Balsa had mistaken for a sewage drain. The mouth of the river was very wide; this place must either be far from the river's source or located at a sort of choke point. Balsa now understood why a warehouse would find this place so useful; shipping goods in secret would be very easy from here.

There were no lights lining the river. The entire area was completely dark. Aside from the man Balsa had seen lying face-down in the water, she saw only one other: he was still and unmoving on the other side of the river. She didn't know if he was alive, but he wasn't moving. She frowned as she recognized him as the boss of the underground jeweler she'd infiltrated. There was a short bow lying next to him within easy reach.

Hugo gasped and stared at the river. The floating enemy started drifting downstream in the direction of the river's source. There was a small boat in the distance.

"We managed to stop them here, but who knows how many of them are waiting for us outside," Hugo muttered. "I don't suppose you're strong enough yet to fight—or even to help me walk out of here."

Balsa laughed. "I don't see any issue with leaving you here. I'll be able to leave on my own soon enough."

Hugo wiped sweat from his forehead and smiled bitterly. "I don't want to let you do that, either. I don't want you die over something so stupid." He glanced at the boat. "I wonder if we might leave here on that. It's worth a try."

There was no way to tell if this was a cargo ship or if it belonged to the enemy, but the ship itself appeared sound and seaworthy. It also wasn't very far from shore; he and Balsa wouldn't have to swim far to make it—but they would still have to swim. Balsa's limbs were still numb and Hugo had just taken an arrow out of his thigh. The ship was so close, but it seemed impossibly far away.

Flames consumed the building over their heads, making them feel entirely too warm. More people from above streamed into this space from other entrances, seeking to escape from the fire. The warehouse itself was made of wood, but this layer and the foundation were all made of solid stone; it was reasonable to escape here if they hadn't been able to get out onto the street in time.

Balsa and Hugo didn't know if any of these people were enemies in disguise. They hadn't been spotted yet, but if they wanted to run, they'd have to do it fast.

"I have an idea," Balsa said. "Help me." She removed her arm from the sleeve of her over-kimono, then ripped the sleeve off. "I have rope at my hip," Balsa said. "Get it and uncoil it. I can't move fast enough." She always kept the rope there, partially to protect her stomach from slashing attacks, but also because rope was always useful to have for times like this.

Hugo pushed aside Balsa's upper kimono enough to find her rope and uncoil it.

"Now tie the rope around my spear's head, under the point," Balsa said. "And remove the scabbard. We might be able to use the spear like a harpoon and latch on to that ship's hull."

Hugo nodded in understanding. He stood up with great effort, then lobbed the spear at the boat as hard as he possibly could. He gripped the rope hard and felt it when the boat started tugging him along. The spear hadn't breached the boat's hull, but it had definitely gotten stuck on something.

"Don't drag the rope on the ground," Balsa said as Hugo approached the boat. He passed the end of the rope to her. Together, they pulled the rope taut and walked alongside the boat. When it was close enough for them to jump on, they did, then retrieved Balsa's spear and crouched down to conceal themselves as best they could.

Chapter 4 - A Small Boat at Night

The small boat was full of wheat. Balsa and Hugo crawled along the hull and felt the boat's movement over the water. The ship was probably headed out to sea, so it might be difficult to get back, but neither Balsa nor Hugo wanted to get off the ship. It was best to hide here and avoid enemy eyes for as long as possible. They had no choice but to trust to luck for the rest.

Hugo stretched out and glanced up, out of one of the high portholes inside the hold. The shore was still visible as the ship drifted downstream.

"How far is it to the sea from here?" Balsa asked.

"Maybe half an hour by boat," Hugo answered quietly. "A lot of streams feed into the main river; it's hard to tell which one we're on now. We'll know we're close when we see a lot of tall grass growing on the shore." Hugo sank into silence and stared at the shore through the narrow porthole.

After a while, Hugo turned on his side and sat up. "Ah! There it is. We're close. Can you move?"

Balsa nodded. They heard the rushing roar of the water on either side of them. Balsa suddenly smelled blood; Hugo was still bleeding. His skin was too warm; she wondered if he had a fever.

The boat tilted and started turning slightly to the left. The boat had entered a narrower tributary; Balsa saw nothing but grass as the ship cut its way forward through the water. The boat finally stopped in place, surrounded by grass that fluttered in the gentle wind.

Aside from the waves lapping the boat and the wind in the grass, there was no sound. A half-moon shone overhead, but the night sky was so cloudy that its illumination didn't count for much. Balsa and Hugo pressed themselves to the hull of the ship and stayed completely still. Hugo's breathing sounded labored; the pain of his injuries had finally

caught up with him. Balsa was now certain that he had a fever: he kept wiping away sweat and his face was flushed red.

Balsa heard footfalls coming from the riverbank, but saw no people. She hoped that it was just wild animals coming to the river for a drink. She faced Hugo and nodded in the direction where she'd heard the sound.

A large dog appeared on the riverbank. It sniffed the ground and dug up the grass as if it had found something valuable. The dog looked up, straight at Hugo as if he knew he was there.

Blood, Balsa thought. *The dog probably smells Hugo's blood*. She held her breath and stared fixedly at the dog. The dog sniffed the ground one more time, then sat down.

"Seems like we're being tracked," Balsa whispered. "And they found us."

"I'm not so sure," Hugo said. "A hunting dog would bark to alert his master about where the prey was."

Balsa rubbed at her numb arms. Some feeling was coming back into them. "There are magic weavers in Rota who can see through the eyes of animals," she said. "They're spies for the Rotan royal family." Balsa stood up and looked down at Hugo. "Would your enemies use such methods to track you?"

Hugo shook his head. "The Nanyoku don't communicate that way. My guess is that we've been discovered by Rotan spies. I've heard of them before. Short and slight, but powerful magic weavers."

"Kashal," Balsa whispered. "Dammit."

"Kashal?" Hugo asked, then coughed violently. There was smoke coming from somewhere; Balsa felt a tickle in her throat. It would be dangerous to drink the river water without boiling it, but if Hugo kept coughing they might be discovered by more than just the dog.

Balsa scooped up some water from the river and brought some to Hugo's mouth; he drank. She took a few sips of water herself and found it a bit muddy and silty, but also refreshing. Her throat no longer hurt.

The dog still sat on the riverbank, watching them. Balsa paid it no mind. Even if the Kashal had found them, neither Balsa nor Hugo were able to move very far. If they climbed up the riverbank and encountered more people, they'd just be inviting more trouble for themselves.

"The Kashal might not be our enemies," Balsa whispered. "They're great trackers and know the land well. I wouldn't want to get on their bad side." She remembered the last time she'd been tracked by the Kashal, when she'd carried Asra through the mountain forests to the town of Shirogai. She had fought with them, but never killed one; she liked to think she'd parted on good terms with their leader, Sufar.

In the best case, the Kashal were an outside party who might help her. At worst, they might ignore her. She wasn't expecting any open hostility from them, but she also couldn't dismiss the possibility completely. Sufar's daughter Shihana had worked very hard to gain the power of the terrifying god Talhamaya for the purpose of installing Prince Ihan safely on Rota's throne after his brother's death. Balsa had interfered with those plans. Shihana could definitely be considered an enemy; many Kashal had taken her side in that conflict. Shihana had fled after her plan had failed last time, but she'd also managed to foil all of her pursuers. She was an excellent spy; Balsa doubted she'd allow herself to be caught easily. She also doubted that Shihana's base of support had disappeared overnight, even taking the failure of her plans and strategies into account.

But even if Shihana was still out there, the purpose of the Kashal had always been to serve and protect Rota's royal family. The southern lords were in league with the Talsh and were more or less diametrically opposed to the royal family. Balsa doubted the Kashal would do anything that might assist the Talsh. It made more sense to think of the Kashal as enemy counterspies to the Talsh.

Hugo muttered something, but Balsa didn't quite catch it.

"Huh?" she asked.

"I'm glad Prince Chagum isn't in lord Suan's palace anymore."

"What?" Balsa asked in clear surprise.

"The Nanyoku are a rowdy lot—no finesse. It was easy to mix in with them and find out what they knew. The last thing I heard was that he escaped. There was quite an uproar over it."

Hugo took a breath, then continued: "The Nanyoku thought we were responsible for breaking him out, but I swear it wasn't us. Though I'm not sure why you'd believe me. The Nanyoku certainly didn't."

Hugo frowned and gritted his teeth. "I need to treat my wounds," he said.

"Seems so."

Hugo removed his belt, then ripped off the sleeves of his under-kimono. He wadded up one sleeve and pressed it to the wound in his side to stop the bleeding. Balsa passed Hugo some of the leather twine she carried at her hip so that he could bind off his leg wound above the knee. With that done, he seized the broken shaft of the arrow and prepared to pull it out.

"Wait," Balsa said. She checked over the state of the wound, then nodded to herself. "All right. Pull it out."

Hugo nodded, took a deep breath and yanked out the arrow on one long pull. The wound bled, but didn't gush; the leather twine tied above his knee was keeping more of the blood back. Hugo took his remaining detached sleeve and pressed down hard on the injury.

With all that done, Hugo stretched out flat on his back and took long, deep breaths. Balsa saw something glint silver on his bare chest and blinked. "Put your shirt back on. Anyone who sees a silver necklace is going to want to steal it. Or it might be used to identify you."

Hugo nodded. He ripped the necklace off, then hid it underneath himself.

"What is that, anyway?" Balsa asked as she got a closer look at it.

"A gift from Prince Raul," Hugo said. "Well, sort of. It's a reward for distinguished service. It'll be useful if we run into any more spies on my side. They'll recognize it for what it is and listen to me." He grinned wryly.

"Were you rewarded for capturing Chagum?" Balsa asked.

Hugo's smile deepened. "Yep." He looked at Balsa for a long time, smile fading by slow degrees. "If you hate me and consider me an enemy, now's your chance to strike me down. You're armed. I'm not. I'm also injured; I can't fight back. You might not ever get a better opportunity than this."

Balsa looked at Hugo expressionlessly for a few moments, then said, "If I wanted to kill you, I would have already done it. Stop trying to atone for your guilt by pushing the responsibility on others. It's annoying."

Hugo couldn't quite meet her eyes. The wind blew through the grass surrounding them, loud; Balsa heard the scurrying of some wild creatures close by, but otherwise it was completely silent.

The wind blowing off the river was cold and made her muscles feel tight and stiff with nervous exhaustion. She stretched out and breathed. Though she was cold, the persistent numbness in her limbs had almost dissipated. If she kept improving at this rate, she might be able to move more or less normally in half a day.

Hugo stretched out a little way away from her with his arm over his eyes. She couldn't tell if he'd fallen asleep or passed out. His slack features made him look incredibly young.

Balsa sighed. How did she get herself into situations like this? She understood that Hugo was a Talsh spy and that she was perfectly within her rights to leave him here, but she couldn't bring herself to do it.

A Rotan bird of prey called a rakurou swooped down on a mouse not far from her in the darkness. Balsa looked up at the stars.

Who helped Chagum escape? And why? Where did he go?

In Rota as in Talsh, there were many factions and motives to consider. Nothing about this situation was black and white. Hugo had known that Chagum was in lord Suan's palace; he seemed to think he was still alive.

Hugo coughed violently and sat up, hunching in on himself as coughing made his injuries protest with the pain of movement. His eyes were open, but he was looking down. His teeth chattered. Balsa put her

palm to Hugo's forehead reflexively, checking his fever. His skin felt hot enough to burn.

Balsa ripped off the sleeve of her own under-kimono and dipped it into the river. She wrung it out, then placed the wet cloth on Hugo's forehead. Hugo closed his eyes and lay down again. Balsa kept dipping the cloth in fresh water whenever it dried out and replacing it on Hugo's forehead.

The moons sank lower in the sky as the night passed. Hugo passed into an uneasy sleep. Balsa stayed up for a little while after, then stretched out and went to sleep herself.

Hugo's voice woke her some time later; it was already getting light out. The sky was blue-purple with early morning light. Hugo was still asleep; he seemed to be having a nightmare. He kept calling out the same word over and over—maybe a name. Balsa thought he was calling out to a woman, but she really couldn't tell. There was pain in his voice.

Balsa shook Hugo's shoulder to wake him up. He opened his eyes and blinked. Hugo glanced up at Balsa through hooded eyes. "Where are we?"

Balsa didn't answer.

Hugo sighed and blinked a few times as he came back to wakefulness. His breath steamed in the cool air. "Ah. I remember. No one found us during the night?" he asked.

Balsa took the damp cloth off Hugo's forehead. "You were having a nightmare," Balsa said.

"Yeah. Fire does that to me sometimes. I can't help but remember....well, certain things. My nightmares never change no matter how much time passes." Hugo closed his eyes again.

Birds started singing with the arrival of dawn. Balsa took in more of their surroundings now that they were visible. "Say," Balsa said, "what did you plan to do when you caught up to Chagum?"

"Who knows?" Hugo replied. He opened his eyes and said, "Sodok was the magic weaver you knocked out and tied up at the harbor. You probably heard me talking to him before. Anyway, he wanted to track down the Crown Prince so that Talsh could use him to force a peaceful resolution to the war. That's what he would have done if we'd found him. But we had no guarantee that he was even alive.

"Right now, New Yogo is like a wild beast being penned in from all sides. Nowhere to run; no way to stop it from being killed and devoured. I know that Crown Prince Chagum wanted to prevent that if possible. His supporters did, too."

Wind sighed through the grass around them.

"But I don't think you're searching for Crown Prince Chagum for political reasons, are you?" Hugo asked.

Balsa simply stared at Hugo. "What are you expecting me to say?" she asked.

Hugo didn't answer immediately. He frowned and said, "I want to help Crown Prince Chagum. He's planning to create an alliance between all the nations of the northern continent. If he wants to actually succeed, then he has to go to Kanbal, and soon—before he sees the King of Rota. I want to tell him that."

Balsa frowned at this unexpected revelation. "Why would you even care?"

Hugo faced Balsa squarely. "New Yogo will go to war at the opening of the new year. Talsh has been using the past two years to fortify and build up their presence on Sangal's islands. They're directing all their land forces to Sangal's main peninsula. Most of these forces belong to Prince Raul. They're battle-hardened veterans who have seen many campaigns, some in Orm, others in Old Yogo."

Hugo's expression was pained. His eyes were as black and dark as bottomless pits. "New Yogo's soldiers have never been to war. They'll be

slaughtered. It won't be a battle; it'll be a bloodbath. That's what the current Mikado has chosen for his nation."

Hugo looked down at his hands. "My guess is that this initial battle will take place in two months, give or take. The King of Rota is already building up resources and preparing for a possible invasion. People say the King of Rota is has a decent heart, but I doubt he'd be foolish enough to send his own troops in to save New Yogo when it's the Mikado's own fault that his troops will be slaughtered. But the King of Kanbal...well, he's in an entirely different position right now."

Balsa's forehead puckered in confusion. "What do you mean?" she asked. "It seems to me that he's in the exact same position. I know he's weak-willed compared to the King of Rota, but his best move right now would likely be to send troops to the border of New Yogo along the Misty Blue Mountains to repel invaders. I don't think he has any interest in helping New Yogo with its problems."

"True enough," Hugo said, "but that's not my meaning. I wanted to tell Crown Prince Chagum to give up on alliances for New Yogo; it's too late for those to be truly effective. What's needed now is an alliance between Rota and Kanbal."

Balsa's eyes widened.

"If New Yogo falls, Rota is next, then Kanbal. The King of Kanbal may be weak-willed, but he's not stupid. He understands all of this. An alliance with Rota would be most beneficial to Rota right now, but it's also critical for Kanbal, for the sake of its future. Rota and Kanbal also share a long border in the north.

"The southern clan lords wouldn't even need to agree to the alliance for it to work," Hugo went on. "If Kanbal and Rota's northern clan lords formed an alliance, they could leave the south to the Talsh and build up a defensible position in the north." Hugo's eyes shone brightly with conviction. "Even if New Yogo falls, they can create a highly defensible wall using the mountains and push back the first wave of the invasion. It would take time and soldiers and resources to break down such a wall. Prince Raul is in charge of the invasion plan for the northern

continent, and he's no fool. He won't waste resources on such a vast scale when there are other diplomatic options available."

"You seem to be skipping ahead pretty far," Balsa said. "I doubt Chagum expects New Yogo to fall to the Talsh. Besides, what would you gain by telling him all of this?"

Hugo shrugged. "I've always wanted to govern a province...but Prince Raul would have to become the Talsh Emperor for that to even be a possibility for me."

Hugo laughed when he saw the troubled expression on Balsa's face. "You must be wondering how Prince Raul failing to conquer the northern continent would put him in a good position to become Emperor. Everything's relative in this case. If Prince Raul fails, it looks bad, sure—but it looks even worse if Prince Hazar succeeds in his place. And Prince Hazar has been building support in Rota all this time, so if New Yogo falls, so will Rota, and quickly. The Emperor of Talsh is very ill at the moment. If Prince Hazar pulls off such a clear victory on the northern continent, then he'll certainly become the next Emperor."

Balsa nodded in sudden understanding. "You want Kanbal to strengthen Rota so that it won't fall to Prince Hazar. The part of Rota Prince Hazar already controls is unstable; the southern clan lords have been trying to start a civil war for years. With the northern clan lords and Kanbal forming that wall you talked about, Prince Hazar wouldn't be able to invade the north. At least not easily."

"Exactly. It's simple." Hugo looked up at the sky. "There's something else you should know. There's...well, kind of a time limit. Talsh is consuming itself from within. They can't afford to spend a lot of time or resources conquering other places right now. It's in their best interest to settle this conflict peacefully before things escalate to violence. All they can hope for if things stay as they are is a bloody and protracted war with an uncertain outcome."

Hugo frowned severely. "The continents are separated by a vast ocean. Talsh can use Sangal as a hub to ship resources and troops, but that's egregiously expensive. They'll need to raise taxes on their own

citizens to pay for that. And they'll need to conscript more soldiers from territories they've recently conquered. Yogo, Orm, Horam, Sangal...the innocent people of those nations will suffer just as much as the people on the northern continent."

Birds twittered in the sky above. Morning light illuminated Hugo's face in bright white light. "Right now, Talsh is like a wineskin filled to bursting. If the situation remains as it is and doesn't shift, the wineskin will burst. Seeing Talsh destroyed might make some people happy, but it would destroy the lives of untold thousands of people. I'd rather not see that happen."

"If the situation is so bad at home, why is Talsh even invading other nations?" Balsa asked. "Why not fix its own problems first? Isn't the south richer and more prosperous, anyway?"

Hugo smiled a little sadly and said, "That used to be true, but not anymore. The southern continent is played out. The weather's getting worse and the harvests get poorer every year.

"Talsh's wars have helped to make it poor, of course, but that's not how the Talsh princes tend to think. They believe the current crisis is a religious one, and that the bounty that the southern continent used to enjoy has been shifted to the northern continent. The source of this prosperity is what they call the Are Rou, the Gate of the Sun."

"Gate of the Sun?" Balsa asked with a frown.

"The Talsh worship a sun god called Are. The god is—was—important in Yogoese culture as well, especially among magic weavers. The priests of Are closely advise the Emperor on all things. It's obvious that the southern continent's climate is changing—it's getting colder and colder with each passing year. The priests advised the Talsh Emperor to look to the north for a source of warmth. If Talsh captures this source—this Gate of the Sun—then it can be prosperous again. That's the theory, anyway."

Balsa's eyebrows lifted slightly. She smiled.

"Looks like you believe that about as much as I do," Hugo said. "But the Talsh Emperor believes it. The Talsh princes believe it. That's why

they're attacking the north. Some of the priests believe that capturing the Gate of the Sun will lead to an eternal spring with no winter, famine, or war. Spies were sent out to look for it." Hugo smiled. "But we never found it."

Hugo stopped speaking and turned his face to the deep blue sky. "The Gate of the Sun might not be real, but it's undeniable that the southern continent is getting colder and more impoverished with each passing year. I understand why the the Talsh Emperor wants to hope for a change for the better."

Balsa remembered that the harvests in New Yogo had been unusually good for the past few years. Even northern Rota, which had usually been poor, had increased its livestock populations after a plague and was faring better than it had in generations.

Hugo was still speaking. "Of course, poorer harvests also affect how much can be collected in taxes. The nations that have been most recently conquered bear the brunt of Talsh taxes, so it's no surprise that Talsh is facing internal dissension and revolt. I'm sure the Emperor is hoping that finding a new source of prosperity will end those problems as well.

"It almost goes without saying that the prince who improves Talsh's lot for the better will be the next Emperor. The current Emperor doesn't have much time left. Whatever the princes do now, they'll have to act fast.

"Still, this crisis isn't new." He sighed. "The princes began plotting to take over New Yogo the instant they heard about the Gate of the Sun. We spies have been on the northern continent for years, searching and gathering information. It's true that the north is warmer than the south now, when it didn't used to be. And it's true that New Yogo has a lot of arable land that's sparsely populated. That's what the two Talsh princes are really after, I think. The Talsh are great at making a little land stretch a long way when it comes to growing food.

"Of course, Rota has some good land, too, but New Yogo has more, and less of it's been developed. That makes it easy for the Talsh to turn

it into whatever they want or need. But Rota's included in this plan, too. When the northern lords eventually revolt, their common people and townsfolk will move south and set up farms there. That's the idea, anyway. Having all this land conquered and used for growing could ensure peace in Talsh for generations to come. There'd be no more taxes, either."

Balsa snorted through her nose. "Seems like a lot of trouble to get someone else to solve their problems for them. They're willing to go to war and spill blood and take innocent lives just so they can take over some land?"

Hugo's smile was tight and filled with pain. "No. It's the opposite."

"Huh?"

"Talsh has always maintained peace through war. This is the same thing. Gaining the land is a secondary goal. For Prince Hazar especially, conquest was always the point. It's just how the Talsh do things. It's a self-feeding cycle: Talsh conquers a country, then recruits soldiers and collects resources from that country so that it can attack another. Men who volunteer to be soldiers make themselves and their families full citizens, so they don't have to pay the high war taxes.

"There's an obvious problem with this strategy: what happens when there are no countries left to conquer? There'll be no need for soldiers then, and a huge country at peace would struggle to support a standing army. I predict that the instability that results from that will bring nothing but chaos."

Hugo smiled coldly. "There aren't really any nations left to conquer on the southern continent. The citizens of Talsh live rich and peaceful lives at the expense of the people they've recently conquered—the Yogoese, and people from Orm and Horam. The Talsh empire chose to attack the northern continent in part so that more people from those nations could gain citizenship through the war."

Balsa snorted again. "Whoever's in charge is an idiot. How long do you think they can keep this up? Like you said, there's only so many countries left to conquer."

Hugo laughed. "Yep." He faced Balsa and stilled his expression to seriousness. "I do think that the Talsh princes are going to see that, and soon. They can't keep going on as they have; old strategies won't work when there are no more independent nations apart from Talsh. I think—well, maybe it's more accurate to say that I hope—that they'll work out a peaceful resolution on the northern continent and convert their soldiers into farmers and merchants to expand their wealth and trade networks.

"But I know that's not Prince Raul's goal now, or Prince Hazar's. From their perspectives, New Yogo looks like a prize being dangled right in front of them. They won't have time to think until one or the other of them has captured it. Unless the northern continent suddenly gets a lot more difficult to conquer, they won't back off."

Hugo sighed. "I planned to tell Crown Prince Chagum all of this if I ever found him. But Crown Prince Chagum, perhaps justifiably, sees me as nothing but Prince Raul's shadow. Maybe if he heard all of this from you, it would carry more weight."

Hugo looked at Balsa. "And so I'll ask you to tell him for me, if you find him. Please."

Balsa didn't say anything in reply. She heard voices from far off and the sound of oars being dipped in the water. It seemed that the people who lived along the riverbank were stirring and going about their morning activities.

"I..." Balsa trailed off. "I really don't care much about what countries do to one another. I just want Chagum to be happy." Her voice was quiet; she sounded like she was speaking to herself. "He's always been at the mercy of his responsibilities because of his birth. I think that being free of it, all of it—governing a country, living for its people—was the only time he was truly happy. Even lugging around firewood and digging out splinters, he seemed completely content."

Hugo smiled a little. "He was great at cleaning on board ship. We were all a bit surprised at that. By the end of the journey, he was as tan as any of the sailors and could have been mistaken for one himself." His

smile grew wider. "So I guess you're the one who taught him how to clean and work."

Balsa's eyes narrowed.

"You definitely won't believe me, but...I want Crown Prince Chagum to be happy, too. I'm not sure it's possible for him to ever live the kind of life he wants, but I still hope he achieves that for himself some day."

Waterfowl that nested in the rushes near the riverbank were suddenly startled by something and scattered in all directions. Balsa put her hand over Hugo's mouth to shut him up.

People are coming.

Balsa could hear them: three or four, maybe more, moving through the tall grass as silently as beasts. Hugo drew his short sword and gripped it in front of him. Balsa pulled up her spear and tested her strength; the drug she'd been given had finally worn off. Balsa tore off a flax bag she wore over her chest off, then used her teeth to split the bag in two, then in two again, creating two pieces of cloth of roughly equal size. She tied each piece of cloth over her bare shins for protection, then she covered Hugo with an empty grain sack to hide him.

"What do you intend to do?" Hugo whispered.

Balsa chuckled. "Run. What else? Injured people are easy to catch, but I can't just sit here quietly and wait for that to happen." She settled the sack completely over Hugo so that it hid him completely.

"You don't have to do that, you know," he said.

Balsa stood up and prepared to leave the boat. She saw the shadows of three people farther up the bank, crouched down in the grass. She removed the scabbard from her spear, then jumped all the way onto solid ground.

The closest person to Balsa was a man carrying a bow. "Don't move!" he shouted at her.

Balsa ignored the command and ran toward the man. The man nocked an arrow and fired straight at Balsa. Balsa turned the arrow aside with her spear, then brought her weapon down in an arc on the man's head. He man's eyes rolled back into his head as he collapsed.

Two more figures emerged from the grass. Balsa picked up the man she'd knocked unconscious and used him as a shield.

"Don't shoot! You'll hit him!" Balsa called out in Rotan.

The other two figures began to move.

"Listen! I'm Balsa the spear wielder," Balsa yelled as loudly as she could. "I'm almost certain that you're Kashal. Why did you attack me? Answer me! If you don't, I'll kill this man."

Giving her name was a gamble. If these Kashal were working for Shihana, she expected them to attack her with everything they had now. She yanked in the unconscious man by his left arm. He was coming to, though he still appeared confused.

"Did you say that you're Balsa the spear wielder?" an old man asked. He had a bow, but it wasn't pointed at her. "We're chasing Talsh Taku—one of their spies. We noticed that a boat went missing from their hideout last night and tracked it down the river. If you're really Balsa the spear wielder, then what were you doing on that boat?"

Balsa lowered the confused man in her arms to the ground. "It's a long story," she said. "I mean you no harm. If you want to capture me, I won't resist. I want to talk to your leader."

Balsa set her spear on the ground, took three steps away from it, and put her hands up.

The two men closing in on her exchanged uncertain glances, then approached Balsa with arrows prepared to fire.

Chapter 5 - A Spy's Motives

The fire set in the hearth crackled and popped as the logs burned. The firelight caught and shone on a wall tapestry embroidered with gold thread. Two men sat near the fire on opposite sides of a low table. They raised two metal glasses rimmed with gold in a toast, then drank. The chairs they sat in were plush and elaborately decorated.

One of the men was lord Suan's oldest son, Ogon. The man sitting across from him was Yogoese and approximately fifty years old. He had some gray in his hair, but his eyes were sharp and he appeared to be in excellent health. The Yogoese man was dressed as a prosperous merchant, but there was something a bit unsettling about him.

Ogon stared into his wine glass with a slightly sour expression. He appeared completely exhausted. He'd received an urgent summons two days ago during a visit to Zeram and had only just arrived back at his father's palace in Tsuram.

There was a knock on the door. He heard the voice of a familiar servant announce the arrival of his daughter, Yurari.

"Send her in," Ogon said irritably.

Yurari was a girl of sixteen. She took three steps into the room and stopped, staring at her father with a sullen expression. She had just woken up, but her eyes were bright and alert. Ogon stared at her with piercing eyes and rested his chin in his hand.

Yurari took a few more steps under the pressure of her father's imperious gaze. She had a slender face and large dark eyes. She kept her face to the floor as she came closer.

"I assume you know why you've been summoned," Ogon said.

Yurari's fine eyebrows drew together. "Yes, I believe so, father. I'm very sorry."

Rage flashed in Ogon's eyes. "Don't think that a simple apology will get you out of this. Why on earth were you even in that room? Who let you in?"

Yurari's expression became utterly serious. "I heard about it from the maids. They were constantly gossiping, so I became curious. I just wanted to see him—just a peek." She took a deep breath and finally looked her father in the eyes. "I'm sorry," she said again.

Ogon looked away from her and faced the man dressed as a Yogoese merchant. "It's like I told you. My daughter made a mistake. There's no grand conspiracy here."

The merchant smiled a complicated sort of smile.

Ogon faced his daughter again and said severely, "You didn't need to bribe the guards to leave you alone in the garden just to see his face!"

Yurari cowered and remained silent. When she noticed that her father was about to stand up, she said hastily, "He told me to. He said he was sick of staying in the room all the time and begged for some time in the garden."

"In the middle of the night?!"

There was a hint of a smile in his daughter's eyes when she looked up. Ogon threw up his hands in exasperation.

"But, father, how could I have known that he'd try to run?!" she shouted. "It all happened so fast that I couldn't stop him! I tried, honest! He climbed a tree and was over the wall so fast that I couldn't even tell which direction he went."

Ogon lowered his raised arms slowly. "What am I going to do with you?" he said bitterly. "I should have married you off a long time ago." He snapped his fingers. "I've got it. I'll promise you to lord Aman's son in Zeram. I'll send the offer over tomorrow."

Yurari's entire disposition changed in an instant. "Father, you can't be serious! How can you expect me to marry that creep?"

Ogon stared at his daughter as if he were looking through her. "I am serious. Raroku is a diligent, serious man; his father is the wealthiest man in the region. It's a good match and you should be happy."

"Daddy!" She stomped her foot.

Ogon chuckled at her. "I've let you play your games and have your way for a long time, Yurari. But this time, you went too far and caused a major problem. I can't have that happen ever again. So cry and scream as much as you want, but you're still going to marry Raroku."

Tears streamed down Yurari's face. Ogon gestured to a servant who tugged at her arm and left the room with her. The door to the room closed again, leaving Ogon alone with his Yogoese guest.

"It seems that matters have gotten a little out of hand," the Yogoese man said. "Rumors of the Crown Prince have spread all over. Maids and servants here all know what he looks like."

"I tried to keep everyone contained here, but it does seem that rumors have spread outside the castle walls. And our esteemed guest was able to use even our vigilance to his advantage in his escape."

Ogon sighed. "We still don't know everything about how this happened. It's true that my daughter bribed the guards to leave them alone in the garden, but she shouted the moment she lost sight of him. My guards searched the palace and its surroundings up and down and saw no sign of him. He vanished like smoke into the air. I'm inclined to think that he had at least one other ally here—one we haven't discovered yet." He paused. "It's been two days—have your spies really discovered nothing about where he went?"

The Yogoese man shook his head. "We're still searching. There is another matter that concerns me as well."

"Oh?"

"A grain warehouse burned down last night. We believe it was a secret hideout for Hokuyoku spies from the northern army. People who live in the area reported hearing sounds of a battle coming from inside before it burned down. No bodies of northern spies were recovered, but we did find a trail of blood leading to the river."

"So you attacked this warehouse and failed to discover any new information?" Ogon said with a frown.

The Yogoese man gripped his wineglass. "It wasn't us. We have reason to believe that a Taku—a hawk, a very high-ranked spy—was in charge of the warehouse. We didn't want to stumble in there without taking every available precaution. My guess is that the warehouse was attacked by spies from this country."

Ogon's frown grew deeper. He stared into the fire in the hearth for a few moments, then lifted his head. "The river people? The Kashal? That's who you think attacked?" He shrugged. "You may be right. They're the King of Rota's lapdogs. Perhaps they attacked to drive the northern spies out before we could discover them or their secrets."

"We don't have time for speculation," the Yogoese man said. "We have to decide what to do."

Ogon sat in brooding silence for a long time, then said, "We don't know how the situation will shift after King Yosam dies. New Yogo is going to be invaded by Talsh soon, isn't it? Now is surely a good time to strike. Let's complete our war preparations in the south as quickly as possible."

The Yogoese man nodded. "Alert your allies to complete their preparations as well."

Ogon gave him a condescending smile. "It's a good thought, maybe, but it's not like they can bring in very many additional troops or resources. A thousand mounted warriors maybe, all scattered around?" His tone was deeply dismissive.

"Oh, I just remembered," Ogon added. "I received interesting news from Zeram recently."

The Yogoese man's eyes fixed coldly on Ogon's face.

"It seems that the right to conquer the northern continent doesn't belong to your master, Prince Hazar, but his younger brother, Prince Raul," Ogon said. "I heard that he has two hundred thousand troops available for the invasion."

The Yogoese man gave Ogon a mocking smile. "We've worked together for years, you and I. My master helped make you and your

fellow lords rich, and now you're thinking about throwing him over for his brother?"

His smile broadened. "Your reports only scratch the surface of Talsh politics and the war effort. If you think that supporting Prince Raul will help you now, you're mistaken. At best, you'll fall into the gulf that separates the two princes, and have no support from Talsh at all. Trust me when I say that you don't want to try playing sides here."

He paused. "We know your ways, lord Ogon. We know that you've been gathering troops in secret in many different places for years—even on the Sangal peninsula. You've been trying to hide it, I know—but so do we. How do you think Prince Hazar would react to news of you and the other southern lords trying to muster up a secret army?"

Ogon looked at him sullenly and said nothing.

"But don't worry," the Yogoese man said in a soothing tone. "Rota is much larger and more vital than New Yogo, in terms of both resources and people. Even if Prince Raul captures New Yogo, Rota is the greater prize, and it will belong to Prince Hazar. I am certain that the Emperor will give his victory here the proper consideration."

The Emperor was a shrewd man. He knew that the two princes, if left alone, would fight one another; therefore he gave them different objectives that still allowed them to compete.

"And if you support the winning side, well... I'm certain Prince Hazar himself will honor your contributions to the cause."

Ogon kept frowning. "As you say, but... Well, I fail to see how the presence of a scant thousand more cavalry fighters would be of benefit at the moment. We're unlikely to peel off any more from that faction; the northern clan lords are deeply loyal to the king. I'm reluctant to draw them into this without some guarantee of our success. They would, at least, need reinforcements. Most of our men are in the south." He shook his head a little. "Once we commit our men to this effort, there is no going back."

The Yogoese man nodded. "I agree. But you will have reinforcements from the north. Consider our ally in Kanbal."

Ogon's eyebrows drew together. "Ah, that's right—that King's Spear. The one who came here to verify our plans and defenses in person."

The Yogoese man nodded. "That is indeed the man. He is perhaps a bit too forthright and honest—he needs to see things with his own eyes and look his allies in the eye before he trusts them. He has the King's ear, however. If he decides to speak out in our cause, then it is likely the King will heed him." There was a devious glint in the Yogoese man's eye.

"It is critical that we don't miss our timing here. With the combined might of your forces, the King's Spears, and the southern army, the armies of the northern clan lords will be utterly crushed."

Ogon nodded, a bit reluctantly.

"We can't leave this situation with the Crown Prince as it is and hope to succeed," the Yogoese man said in a low tone. "We need to get him back."

Ogon stroked his chin and regarded the Yogoese man with a dubious expression. "Are you suggesting we send out even more pursuers? I don't really think we need him here."

"Yes, we do. He knows too much. We must hunt him down to prevent him from doing any more damage."

Ogon knew that more men likely couldn't be spared for the search. He frowned, but he nodded.

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The Yogoese man dressed like a merchant left Ogon's chambers and faced the eastern wing of lord Suan's palace. His opulently furnished guest quarters were located there. Many other prosperous merchants were currently staying in the palace; the Yogoese man met and consulted with them often.

The Yogoese man stopped near a door in the eastern wing of the palace and rung a small bell that was attached to the wall. The door opened; the Yogoese man slipped silently into the room.

It was already quite late at night, but the three men sitting inside the room near the hearth were awake. Two of the men were Yogoese, but the third was an exceptionally tall Kanbalese man. They all sat at a low table, talking over drinks. All three men were dressed as merchants, but the Kanbalese man did not have the air of one.

As the Yogoese man walked further into the room, he saw another man standing in a shadowy corner. He wasn't drinking or speaking. He was dressed as a guard and carried a sword unlike most customary Rotan short swords; it was very long and heavy-looking. The man did appear strong enough to swing it.

The two Yogoese merchants stood up from the table. One pulled over a chair and sat down. "How did it go?" he asked.

"We're supposed to increase the search," the Yogoese man who had just entered the room said.

The Kanbalese man still sitting at the table frowned. "So lord Ogon is still of a mind to kill the Crown Prince?"

"I'm sure he'd be pleased if the current crop of pursuers could kill him. It's a shame he's seen your faces. It's not possible to simply let him go now."

The Kanbalese man frowned. *I don't like the way that man talks.*

Revealing their faces to the Crown Prince had been an accident; the Kanbalese man didn't blame anyone for it. He remembered the circumstances of that sudden and unexpected meeting with a bitter expression.

The Kanbalese man had been walking down a hallway when he'd caught sight of Crown Prince Chagum surrounded by guards and attendants. Crown Prince Chagum had looked him in the eyes with a puzzled expression. They hadn't exchanged words, but the Crown Prince Chagum had definitely seen him, along with several other merchants and spies.

Chagum's gaze had given the Kanbalese man an uneasy feeling. He'd seemed to see all the way through him in a single glance. He still remembered the Chagum's face with perfect clarity.

The Kanbalese man had come to Rota with the cover of selling rare medicinal herbs from Kanbal in Rota's largest market. The Kanbalese man knew that Crown Prince Chagum wasn't about to mistake him for a merchant. They'd met before, very briefly, in Sangal during the last king's coronation ceremony. He suspected that Crown Prince Chagum remembered him, too. Even if he didn't, seeing a lone Kanbalese man in lord Suan's palace looked strange. He knew that.

If Crown Prince Chagum had truly escaped and managed to make it to Rota's royal palace, the southern lords' scheming would be utterly exposed.

"Don't worry," the Yogoese man said. "You're important to us; we need you. The northern spies from Talsh and the Kashal can search all they want for direct connections between us and you, but rest assured, they won't find them. You're safe here."

The Kanbalese man covered his face with his hands.

"Is that why you have to kill him? To keep me safe?" the Kanbalese man asked through trembling fingers. He kept his face covered for a long time and stood as still as a statue. Even in this pose, he looked like a warrior, burly and strong; his posture was rigid. His uncovered face would have conveyed everything he was feeling; he was an essentially honest man.

"I don't want you to kill him," the Kanbalese man said. "It doesn't really matter if the King of Rota finds out about me. If he does, I'll just come up with a better excuse to explain my presence here. I'll think of something."

The Yogoese man regarded the Kanbalese man with an inscrutable expression. He was an absolutely vital part of Talsh's plan to conquer both Rota and Kanbal. As a King's Spear—a strong warrior who commanded even his king's respect—he was generally well-regarded and trustworthy. If his diplomatic efforts here were successful, he would be given a palace of his own and status in Rota's royal court within two years' time. He might be able to live in Rota as a permanent resident in as little as a year and a half.

The Kanbalese man had come all the way here from his homeland to formalize this secret agreement. He had officially come to lord Suan's palace to trade this year's supply of luisha, a precious stone unique to Kanbal, for grain, but his supply of luisha had been traded away long ago. He no longer had any obvious diplomatic reason to remain.

That was why he'd disguised himself as a merchant and sold herbs. He had hoped that he wouldn't be recognized in his capacity as a King's Spear, but those hopes had proved fruitless. Crown Prince Chagum had seen him. Rota's spies and Talsh's both knew it. They couldn't simply let him go and tell all their plans to Rota's king.

"I understand," the Yogoese man said, "but you must understand our position as well as the Crown Prince's. We know that he desires an alliance with Kanbal as well as Rota. If he met with your king, what do you think he would say?"

The Kanbalese man blanched at that, but then shook his head.

"I don't care if the Crown Prince reports me to the King. That doesn't matter. The King of Kanbal trusts me implicitly. He'd never believe the words of a foreign prince over my own. I think the best thing to do now would be to send me on my way home, and quickly, before we risk losing our advantage. Crown Prince Chagum needs to go all the way to Jitan to reach Prince Ihan. That will take time. I can reach the King of Kanbal well before he arrives at Jitan if I leave now."

The Yogoese man wanted to give the man a good scolding as he deserved, but he kept his face entirely expressionless. He thought for a moment, then nodded. "Very well. Head back to your king, then, if the thought of the boy's death is so abhorrent to you." He stood up straight, then bowed and left the room along with the servants who'd been attending on him.

The hallways were deserted at this time of night. He turned to one of his attendants and said, "You know what you have to do."

The servant nodded and withdrew.

I can't believe he lost that Crown Prince when he had him right where we wanted him. He's an idiot, the Yogoese man thought.

If he'd been rescued by Kashal spies, then he was forced to assume that the King of Rota knew more about the southern lords' scheming than he'd thought. The King might even know of the southern lords' alliance with Prince Hazar.

Even if he didn't currently, he would when Crown Prince Chagum finally met with him. And Crown Prince Chagum knew something that the Kanbalese man did not: he knew that the right to attack northern Rota belonged to Prince Raul, not Prince Hazar.

That being the case, New Yogo and Kanbal were under roughly equal threat. If Prince Raul succeeded in taking over New Yogo as well as northern Rota, Kanbal would essentially be surrounded. If Crown Prince Chagum told the King of Kanbal this, he might be persuaded into an alliance with New Yogo or Rota's northern lords to help fend off an invasion of his own land.

Right now, most of Prince Hazar's power here was little more than a smokescreen. There were Talsh forces in southern Rota, but they weren't permitted to attack the north. The south was as good as conquered. Only Prince Raul could move forces further north—but the King of Kanbal mustn't learn that before all of Talsh's forces were in position. If he did, he would have time to act against them, through an alliance with New Yogo or some other means.

Fortunately, Kanbal was somewhat far off and its information network was disconnected at the best of times. News took time to travel, and even if it reached the King, that news couldn't be spread to all of Kanbal quickly or easily. And Kanbal had never had an appetite for foreign news. They understood the broad strokes of what was happening in New Yogo and northern Rota, but had no inherent interest in Talsh or the scheming of the southern clan lords.

It was vital that Kanbal be left in the dark regarding Talsh's plans for as long as possible. If they learned what Talsh's plans truly were before the time was right, Prince Raul's carefully constructed invasion plan would crumble to nothing. Crown Prince Chagum could not be permitted to live and go to Kanbal to tell King Radalle what he knew.

The Yogoese man glanced to the side at one of his guards, who was also from Yogo. "I'll be counting on you as well," he said.

The guard nodded.

The Yogoese had been conquered by Talsh relatively recently and still weren't trusted within the empire. This was a chance to demonstrate that the Yogoese could be loyal and effective citizens. He couldn't waste it.

This particular guard had been appointed by Prince Hazar himself to help lead his armies. Prince Hazar himself had little experience with weapons or close combat. The guard was also skilled as an assassin. He was a natural leader who others wanted to follow. He'd lost count of how many people he'd successfully assassinated; he almost always succeeded because he never went in to any assassination mission with only one plan. If the first plan failed, he always had a backup option prepared.

If Ogon's pursuers could discover Crown Prince Chagum's whereabouts, this guard could likely assassinate him easily. The Yogoese man had urged Ogon to send out more pursuers primarily for this reason. He'd been thinking about the best and fastest way to kill Crown Prince Chagum ever since his escape.

Chapter 6 - Ahal Tosaha

The Kashal did take Balsa to their leader, but it was a long time before Balsa was permitted to talk to them. The Kashal spent hours in consultation and discussion with one another, doubtless debating what to do with her. Balsa spent those hours confined to a small inn just outside of Tsuram. She couldn't help thinking about what had happened to Chagum. She had water hauled in for a cold bath, then cleaned herself up and considered the events of the past few days.

Balsa wondered if Hugo had managed to escape safely. She assumed he had; he didn't seem the the sort of man to die easily. He had told her about the two factions that existed within the Talsh spy network and about the southern clan lords' betrayal of Rota. Balsa had fallen in with the Kashal again, but she still had no idea what to expect. The mysteries surrounding Chagum and his whereabouts were like a whirlpool without a bottom. She tried to organize everything she knew in her mind, but the pieces were too complicated for her to form a complete picture of the situation.

All in all, the Kashal deliberated for more than two days. A young man came to fetch Balsa on the morning of the third day after she'd been shut up inside the inn. "Prepare yourself and come with me," the man said. "Our leader has agreed to meet with you." After a short pause, he added, "Your weapons are with our leader. If you mean no harm, you'll be permitted to collect them."

Balsa followed the young man outside. There were horses tethered just outside the inn. Balsa mounted a horse and followed the man along the Sal highway, which faced north. The man was mounted as well, so when the path leveled off and widened, he urged his horse into a gallop. Balsa did the same.

The Sal highway ran along the line of the Hura river for a long way before connecting with the King's highway at a large crossroads. The

man kept galloping and turned onto the King's highway. After about two hours, he turned his horse eastward onto a narrower path. Balsa followed him closely.

The narrower path crossed an enormous field teeming with ripe wheat stalks. The air smelled damp and earthy; the weather was warm. It had been an exceptionally good growing year for wheat in Rota; most farmers had been able to harvest their wheat twice. The deep blue sky contrasted with the pale yellow sheen of the wheat.

The young man directed his horse onto a narrow path that had been made between sections of the wheat field. The wind blew through the wheat, making the heads glitter and gleam like silver and gold. Balsa followed the man to the very edge of the field to the border of a forest.

After they were hidden in the trees, the young man turned to Balsa and said, "Please dismount. The location of our leader is hidden, so we must travel the rest of the way secretly. Your eyes must be covered to protect the location of our village."

Balsa slipped off the horse without saying a word. The young man placed a blindfold over her eyes, then helped her mount up again. He stayed alongside her to help guide her as they passed through the woods.

"The horse knows the way," he said after a little while. "Just leave it to him and we'll all make it safely."

Balsa nodded in acknowledgement. She couldn't see a thing through the thick black cloth of the blindfold. Balsa tried to use the sounds and smells around her to create a mental map of her location. The horse started moving in a zig-zag pattern and opted for a slow pace, so she guessed that the horse was climbing.

The journey from the field's edge was a long one. The young man turned toward Balsa during their long ascent and said, "Say...can I ask you something?"

"Go ahead," Balsa said.

"Is it true that you defeated Shihana in single combat?"

Balsa chuckled, but didn't answer the question.

"I've seen Shihana fight before." The young man's voice was awed. "She was amazing. The best fighter in our entire river clan. There's no way anyone could be a match for her."

The young man's voice was suddenly louder; he must have come closer. "I can tell you're a warrior, though. And very likely a good one. If you really defeated Shihana, I wish you'd tell me. My brother would be shocked and amazed if I told him I met you!"

"Your brother?" Balsa asked with a little laugh. "Where is he?"

"Back in that inn we just left. He was still unconscious this morning, but he was moving around. He'll be fine in a few days."

The young man seemed reluctant to say more. He and Balsa traveled silently for a few more minutes; then the young man reached out and grabbed her hand. "All right. We're here. I can remove your blindfold now."

The young man untied the blindfold and pulled it down. Balsa blinked at the sudden onslaught of harsh, clear sunlight after so much time spent in darkness and wiped reflexive tears out of her eyes. There was another wide wheat field in front of her. If she squinted, she could see thin trails of smoke rising from the ground beneath the planted wheat. The red light of the setting sun shone along the surface of a river that was likely the Hura; the wheat field stopped at the riverbank and gave way to more forest.

Balsa saw some people fishing with nets along the riverbank. A little further downstream, women were washing clothes. Everyone wore a strip of yellow cloth around their necks.

So this is a Kashal village...

Balsa remembered that the Kashal were also known as Rota's river people. The young man next to her removed a long length of yellow cloth from a saddlebag and tied it around his own neck. He pointed to the cloth and said, "This is an osshal. We believe that it warms the soul."

"Warms...the soul?"

The young man nodded. "The souls of good-hearted people who pass on are always yellow. Some of us can see them. They feel warm. They're

the same color as our watch-fires at night."

The young man's eyes clouded over. "My cousin was killed in that attack on the warehouse. Please look over there."

The young man pointed toward the river. Balsa saw a long yellow strip of something like string floating in the current. She squinted and noticed that the string itself wasn't yellow, but white. The yellow color came from tiny flowers that had been threaded through the string.

"The last flower added to that string is my brother's soul," the young man said. "The flowers slide off the string into the river one by one, returning the souls of our dead to the river god. We wear these yellow bands so that they will recognize us as good spirits and stay in the village until their souls pass on."

Balsa remembered the man she'd seen face-down and unmoving in the warehouse. Had the Kashal carried him all the way here?

The young man sighed and smoothed his expression. "We're headed there," he said, pointing. "We'll leave the horses here and walk the rest of the way. Tie the reins to these trees so my friends will find the horses."

Balsa did as she was asked and followed the young man toward the forest on the other side of the river. The women washing clothes and the people fishing all looked up as they passed. The grass was knee-high in most places and the path was only wide enough for one person to pass at a time. Balsa followed the young man closely. Once in a while, she caught a glimpse of someone's face watching them, but when she turned to look the face was always gone. Clearly, she was being watched.

A tousle-haired little boy appeared on her right-hand side. He was chewing on grass. Balsa stopped to look at him, since he wasn't shying away from her. He looked to be about five or six years old. As Balsa watched, he spat out the grass in his mouth and squealed in delight as it startled a hidden flock of waterfowl behind him.

A little girl appeared to Balsa's left, looking at her with huge round eyes. She was chewing on grass as well. The young man guiding Balsa laughed a little and pretended that he didn't see the children.

As they progressed forward through the grass, Balsa heard a strange sound like whistling or music; people played stalks of grass like tiny flutes. She wondered if all of the players were children and burst out laughing.

The young man couldn't help himself; he laughed as well.

The riverbed appeared in front of them. The river was shallow here, so they crossed and started climbing a steep incline. The grasslands receded with every step, giving rise to a muddy, rocky area. The stones protected the riverbanks from eroding quickly, which also helped protect the Kashal's underground homes.

The young man stopped suddenly over a thick clump of grass that looked pretty much like all the other clumps of grass that Balsa had seen and pressed down deliberately with his foot two times. The grass parted, revealing two people concealed in a hole below.

"This is our leader's house," the young man said.

Balsa crouched down and looked into the hole. There were crude steps leading down to an even lower level, blocked by a middle-aged man. When Balsa met his gaze, he nodded.

"Welcome. Please come in. Our leader is awaiting you."

The stairs were very narrow. Balsa had to bend over so that she wouldn't hit her head as she descended. When she reached the very bottom of the steps, her eyes widened in surprise. The room she saw was very large and tall enough to stand comfortably in. It was also brightly lit: as light as day. The walls of the room were formed of the same stone she'd seen when she and her guide had climbed up the riverbank. The light came from the sun; there were tiny gaps in the wall that permitted sunlight to shine in. The quality of the light was thick and golden, as if the room had been covered in a thick blanket of illumination.

Everything appeared to be white: the walls, the floor, the ceiling. Only the hearth was black with uncleaned soot. Shelves lined the walls. Balsa saw boxes of supplies and jugs of water and other liquid along with dolls and children's toys. The air was sweet-smelling, like candy.

There was a low dining table in the middle of the room. A plump woman somewhat older than Balsa sat at the table with a baby in her lap. An old man with white hair sat next to her. The baby was silent, sleeping like a log. Balsa looked down and saw another child hiding

underneath the table near the woman's feet: it was a girl, maybe two or three years old.

When the woman sitting at the table caught sight of Balsa, she stood up from her chair and passed the baby she held to the old man. The old man accepted the child easily; the baby didn't wake.

The old man called out to the little girl, "Hey! Want to come here and play with grandpa?" He bent down and lifted her up. With the baby held in one arm and the little girl in the other, he crossed the room and sat on a cotton rug.

The plump woman beckoned to Balsa with a bright smile that made her appear much younger than she was.

"It's nice to meet you," she said. "I am Ahal Tohasa, of the Tohasa river clan. You must be Balsa the spear wielder."

"Yes," she said. She was a little confused. She knew nothing of Kashal families in Rota. She'd expected the leader of the Kashal in this region to be a man or at least a warrior, but Ahal Tohasa seemed to be an entirely ordinary woman.

Ahal laughed when she saw Balsa's expression. "I see. You don't think I look much like a leader, do you? I know I don't look like much, but there's a lot that I can do—and I do it. Otherwise I wouldn't have been chosen. But let's put first impressions aside. Please take a seat."

Balsa set herself across from Ahal and sat down so that she faced her directly. The man Balsa had seen at the top of the stairs came down, then sat next to Ahal.

"This is my husband," Ahal said. She smiled at him, then turned her focused attention on Balsa.

"Now isn't all this odd? I never thought I'd meet you under these circumstances. You're famous among the Kashal, you know. I've heard a song about you that I absolutely loved. Have you heard it? It goes like this…" She began to hum.

Balsa grimaced and shook her head. "Nope. Never heard it before."

Ahal's eyebrows went up. "Really? What a shame. But, well, you didn't come here so that we could talk about that."

Her expression became serious. "You assisted us in a time of grave peril, when it seemed that Talhamaya would return to our world. I wish to express my gratitude to you on behalf of all of the Kashal." She slapped her knees. "And now that that's out of the way, we can talk about that warehouse attack."

She stood up and retrieved a tea tray that included cups, a steaming teapot, and baked candies that Balsa didn't recognize.

"We did attack that warehouse, but we didn't expect things to get so violent," she said. "We've been keeping watch on merchants that we assumed to be Talsh spies for quite a long time. We hoped to trail some of them home to their bases quietly, so that we could infiltrate their ranks and discover their secrets without being detected.

"But Talsh spies are cautious. It was difficult to get close enough to watch them. But the morning of the attack, we saw one of them emerge from lord Suan's palace. We weren't absolutely certain that he was a spy, but when he led us straight to that warehouse, we were certain."

Balsa suddenly remembered what Hugo had said about enemy spies being scattered among the Nanyoku faction. Some of those must have helped Chagum escape. The Kashal must have followed one of them to Hugo's hiding place.

"When we discovered the warehouse, we got a little over-excited. We knew we'd have to move quickly before we were discovered and they moved to a new location, so we decided to attack immediately. The rest you know; you were there.

"Maybe you disagree with our methods. But we've encountered these spies before. If they knew of us, they would not rest until every single one of us was dead. We had to eliminate that threat before they eliminated us. I apologize for putting you in danger, unwitting or not. The responsibility for ordering the attack was mine and mine alone."

Ahal looked at Balsa with a hooded gaze, as if she were ashamed.

"I am curious, Balsa the spear wielder—what were you doing in that warehouse? I highly doubt that you are a Talsh spy."

"I'm looking for someone," Balsa said quietly. "I heard that he'd gone to lord Suan's palace. I tried to learn more from the guards who work there, but then I was attacked." Balsa told Ahal everything that had happened to her over the past week or so, omitting Chagum's name and that Hugo had escaped.

Ahal listened to her intently. When Balsa stopped speaking, she ran a hand through her hair and said, "I see. I heard about the attack on the tavern. You have no reason to lie to us, so I have no reason to doubt your story. Please forgive me for pressing you when I'm sure you have questions yourself." She paused, then added, "I feared that you were responsible for the death of one of our own, Oguhal—but it seems that is not the case. We found another man's body next to his, so it seems likely that this other man was the killer, as we first suspected."

Ahal paused, then said, "But some things still don't make sense to me. Why did you flee during the attack? Why did you steal a boat?" She stared at Balsa with piercing eyes. "I'll tell you something else, for friendship's sake. Our spies saw the boat leaving the warehouse. There were two people on it, not just one."

Balsa held Ahal's gaze. Balsa no longer thought she appeared to be an ordinary woman. She believed that Ahal had the authority and force of will to order the attack on that warehouse.

Ahal's eyes were sharp, but her tone remained calm as she said, "You escaped on that boat with the man who killed Oguhal, didn't you? So that you wouldn't be discovered and caught by the others. Balsa, why are you shielding a Talsh spy?"

Balsa responded with equal calm. "He saved my life," she said. "During that attack on the tavern, I was poisoned. He carried me to safety and made sure I had medicine. If I'd left him behind during my escape, he would have burned to death in that warehouse."

Ahal frowned slightly. "But didn't you see Oguhal lying dead there? You must have. You must have known that the Talsh spy killed him—yet you continue to protect him. I'll ask again: why?"

Balsa looked straight at Ahal and said, "Yes, he killed someone. I knew that. But I couldn't leave him to die. I owed him a debt. Besides, I could have died in the fire that you and your allies set." She thought a moment. "And if I'd tried to escape in the boat, wouldn't Oguhal have tried to shoot me, if he could?"

Ahal opened her mouth to say something, then closed it. "Yes," she said reluctantly. "You're right. He would have shot you." She sighed and shook her head.

"But I still have questions. Why would a Talsh spy save you from those men at the tavern? Why would he assist in your escape from the fire?" She looked at Balsa with eyes that seemed to search for the bottom of her soul.

Balsa had no desire to be Ahal's enemy, but she also didn't want to tell her everything she knew. If she described the internal conflicts that existed within the Talsh spy network, Ahal would only want to know more. Balsa would probably be compelled to tell her everything she knew—including everything she knew about Hugo.

"I don't know," she said. "Honestly. The drug I was given knocked me out, and then I couldn't move for more than a day. I didn't see him for most of that time. We barely spoke before the attack."

Ahal regarded her with a distrustful expression. "But you escaped together? So you must have spoken? Must have planned something together?"

Balsa shook her head. "Nothing so sophisticated. The man I escaped with had an arrow in his thigh, a wound in his side and a high fever. He wasn't thinking well enough to plan anything."

Ahal's eyebrows drew together. She glanced over at her husband, then over at the old man and the two children sitting in the corner.

The old man cradled the baby on his knees and said, "That woman is telling the truth. She's hiding something, but she's not lying. That's what I think."

Ahal's husband nodded in agreement with this assessment.

Ahal's shoulders relaxed. She looked down at the floor for a moment, clearly deep in thought. She lifted her head and said, "All right. We didn't know you were in the warehouse when we attacked. If things had gone badly, you could have died." She grinned a bit sheepishly. "It's like Crown Prince Chagum said. Trying to interrogate you is like trying to get soup from a stone."

Balsa's heart skipped beat. "You've seen Crown Prince Chagum?"

"Yes." She smiled brightly. "I would have told you sooner, but, well, you can never be too careful in these times.

"I've been keeping watch over lord Suan's palace of for years. Sufar, the leader of the Kashal in the north, gave me those orders long ago. I have many allies and friends inside the palace. The palace itself is riddled with tunnels and secret passages, so it's relatively easy to get in and out." She chuckled.

"About two weeks ago, I heard a funny tale from one of our spies who watches the gate. Lord Suan's son Ogon met a young man there dressed in Rassharou fashion, though he did not appear to be a Rassharou fisherman. Our spy was too far away to hear what they discussed, but he observed lord Ogon dismounting from his horse and leading Crown Prince Chagum into the palace. Shortly after, he observed a merchant who we know to be a Talsh spy enter the gate, as if he were following them."

Ahal then had the maids in the palace keep an eye on this strange visitor. "Crown Prince Chagum was kept confined, but given polite treatment. We wondered who he was. He had appeared mysteriously and seemed to be a hostage. The maids reported that he was indeed being treated well; it didn't seem like lord Suan wanted to kill him. But he was never allowed outside his rooms.

"Our spies tried to contact him directly. To do that, we would have to find some way to remove him from his guest chamber. Before we could think of a way to reach him, he managed to escape himself."

Ahal laughed. "It seems that lord Suan's granddaughter was smitten with him. Can you believe it? Well, she is a tremendous flirt, so perhaps

we should not have been so surprised. She liked to meet with him, thinking herself secret. Crown Prince Chagum convinced her to go out walking in the garden with him at midnight, alone."

Balsa smiled as she listened, imagining Chagum sneaking out of his room for a secret tryst with a girl. *He's the right age to be doing things like that...*

"Crown Prince Chagum's ploy succeeded. He made up some excuse so that she wouldn't come looking for him immediately, then climbed over the garden wall. The girl screamed for the guards as soon as she realized what had happened, but our spies found him before they did and led him into the secret tunnels beneath the palace."

Balsa nodded, frowning a little as she listened. "And he said his name was Crown Prince Chagum? He told you that?"

Ahal nodded. "You know that we work for the King of Rota. He'd heard of us, and told us who he was as soon as he was convinced that we would help him reach the King. We sent him on to the northern palace after his escape."

Ahal reached for her teacup and drank.

"We didn't believe him at first," Ahal said. "Crown Prince Chagum is supposed to be dead. None of us had ever seen his face before, so it was hard to verify that he was telling the truth. He understood why we doubted him and remained calm. He claimed that he'd met King Yosam in Sangal, so all that would be needed to prove his identity would be to lead him before the King. That was all he asked for."

Ahal shook her head slowly. "He was so kind, yet so guarded. And clearly very brave."

"Which way did he go?" Balsa asked. "And when?"

"He went north," Ahal said.

"To the northern palace? Is that where King Yosam is right now?"

"No," Ahal said, a little sadly. "Most people don't know this yet, but King Yosam's health is very poor. He's in no condition to receive visitors, even if he wanted to."

"Is he sick? How bad is it?"

Ahal's concern was plain on her face. "No one knows how severe the illness is. The only consistent symptom is a high fever. His father died of a similar illness when he was quite young. Naturally, we're all worried for our King."

Ahal sighed, then said, "Right now, the one who does all the actual governing is Prince Ihan. We sent Crown Prince Chagum to him. Prince Ihan is in a good position to help him. He's been consolidating support from the northern clan lords ever since the southern clan lords openly defied him at our nation's founding ceremony. Prince Ihan resides in the northern palace, not in the royal palace at the capital. It's safer for him there."

The northern palace. Balsa knew it: it was in Jitan, where Rota's Ritual Hall was situated.

"So Crown Prince Chagum is in Jitan?"

Ahal nodded, then stood up. She removed a single scroll from a shelf on the wall and turned toward Balsa. "Crown Prince Chagum talked about you a lot."

Balsa held her breath and looked up at Ahal.

"When he told us who he was, I remembered that song I love. I decided to ask him about his past—to verify his identity and to figure out which parts of the song were true." She shrugged. "Crown Prince Chagum seemed shocked that I would ask him such a thing."

Balsa remained silent.

"He wouldn't answer my questions, but he did leave this letter here in case we found you anywhere in Rota. He wanted us to tell you that he was safe, and what his plans were."

"When did he give you this letter?"

"The same day we brought you here, in the afternoon."

Balsa looked at Ahal with a hard-edged expression. "You must have known who I was looking for when you brought me here, yet you sent him away with a three-day head start. You kept me confined here for all

that time. Why would you do that? Why didn't you let me go with him—or at least go after him?"

"Crown Prince Chagum asked us to," Ahal said. She extended the parchment she held to Balsa. "He wrote this for you. He wrote it in front of me and didn't care if I read it or not. All he wanted was for me to deliver it to you."

Balsa accepted the letter and began to read. It was written in Rotan, in a firm and clear hand.

Balsa,

I know you're searching for me. Thank you. I'm happy beyond words that you made it all the way here to Rota safely. I wanted to meet you when you came in with the other Kashal, but I couldn't. I need to ask you to stop looking for me. I'm certain that Tanda needs your help more than I do. New Yogo will soon be at war. If I don't succeed in my plan, and soon, then every town and city and field will become a sheet of fire. Find Tanda and Torogai and flee to the mountains while there's still time. Hunter's Hole should work well to hide you.

As long as I know you're all alive somewhere, I can keep trying. I'm fine, Balsa, really. Please don't worry about me. I swear that I'll make it back to New Yogo safely someday, no matter what happens.

Tears streamed down Balsa's cheeks, but she didn't notice them. She stared down at the letter and read it over again with her shoulders clenched. When she looked up at Ahal, she was crying as well.

"Please don't worry," she said. "I sent him directly to Prince Ihan with an escort. He'll be perfectly safe."

Balsa nodded in thanks. She had no doubt that Ahal was telling the truth. The Kashal opposed the southern clan lords in almost all things; helping Crown Prince Chagum would deal those greedy lords a blow that it would be difficult to recover from. She was glad the Kashal had rescued Chagum before he could be handed over to the Talsh.

While she was happy that Chagum was being protected right now, she would much rather protect him herself. The idea that he'd deliberately left her behind made her heart hurt.

"Will you go home?" Ahal asked softly. "I have your spear here, and your pack, but you don't seem to have much by way of money or supplies. We can give you what you need to get you on your way. Just ask."

Balsa smiled. "Thank you, but I'm fine. I have a fair bit of money sewn into my clothes, and I'm used to traveling alone. If possible, I would like to borrow a horse from you. I'll leave it at Tsuram with a horse lender so that you can come to collect it."

"Certainly, we'll lend you a horse. Where will you return it, specifically?"

"Okul street, at the Taku Hol inn. My own horse is there. I paid in advance for more than a week, so it's probably still there."

Ahal nodded.

"I know the Taku Hol inn. It's right on the sea. Leave the horse there and we'll come and collect it."

Ahal's husband picked up Balsa's spear and passed it to her. The light streaming in from holes in the wall was dimming and turning red; the day had passed and it was almost sunset. The baby that lay in the old man's arms was still sound asleep.

Chapter 7 - Balsa's Decision

By the time Balsa departed from the Kashal village following the line of the Sal highway, the sun was going down. The golden light of sunset shone on the yellow grass around her, making it difficult to distinguish between the earth and the sky.

Balsa parted with her guide at the edge of the village and ran toward Tsuram harbor at a sprint. She ran as the stars came out and the wind at her back turned cold and bracing. Her breath steamed in front of her face in a white cloud as she pushed her pace faster. She thought about Chagum as she ran, remembering all the things he'd said to her at their last meeting.

He'd still been a boy then, though he'd grown up a lot with her. It was only after receiving Jin's short letter that she realized that Chagum had become an adult without her noticing how much time had passed. She could only think of him as the eleven-year-old boy that she'd carried on her back away from New Yogo's imperial palace so that she could save his life.

She knew that Chagum was sixteen now. He'd gotten himself embroiled in complex schemes and political maneuvering between nations. But to her, he was still the same boy she'd reluctantly left behind all those years ago.

I hope you know what you're doing, Chagum. I don't know what kind of road you're on, but I certainly hope you don't get lost.

He could no longer shirk his responsibilities as a politician and diplomat; he'd been born into that life. He hated being a prince and living in a palace...that was how she remembered him, but he wasn't the same little boy anymore.

She suddenly remembered what Hugo had said: *You definitely won't believe me, but...I want Crown Prince Chagum to be happy, too. I'm not*

sure it's possible for him to ever live the kind of life he wants, but I still hope he achieves that for himself some day.

She understood exactly how Hugo felt. A long time ago, she'd believed that if he could only live as an ordinary person, without the burdens of his station and his birth on him, then that would be enough. She wasn't quite sure that was the case anymore. He had put his heart and soul into protecting New Yogo from being invaded by the Talsh empire.

Wind blew in Balsa's face. She narrowed her eyes, smiled, and thought, *Well, I guess it's not my place to choose his life for him. What he chooses to do is entirely up to him.*

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It was past midnight when Balsa reached Tsuram harbor. There were still many people milling about the Taku Hol inn, renting or returning horses. Some had clearly just come from taverns or gambling dens; they called out to friends and companions in light voices as they conducted their business.

The inn's entrance opened out into a wide room for receiving guests. There was a fire set in the room's hearth. Two men sat in chairs next to the fire. One of the men was the owner of the inn; the other appeared to be his friend. They were drinking together and talking when Balsa entered.

The owner of the inn regarded her with a displeased frown. "So you're finally back. You've been gone for six days. I had half a mind to sell your horse and your luggage to recoup my losses."

Balsa approached the hearth and rubbed her chilled hands together. "I'm sorry I was gone so long. I was...unavoidably detained. But didn't I pay you ten days ahead to start with?"

"Hm." He snorted. "If you hadn't, your horse would already be gone." He put his hands on his knees and stood up. He crossed the room and

retrieved a mass of keys from a hidden place in the wall. He fiddled around with the keys for a moment, then gave one to Balsa.

"Here. The kitchen is closed and the fires have been banked, so I can't feed you tonight. But the baths are still open if you need one."

Balsa nodded as she accepted the key. She'd eaten tea sweets with Ahal, but otherwise she hadn't eaten anything all day. Strangely, she wasn't hungry.

The innkeeper glanced at Balsa's face and said, "Your face looks pale. Are you feeling well?"

Balsa looked at him in surprise. "Really? I feel fine."

The innkeeper snorted through his nose. "Stay here for the night. You'll probably have a cold in the morning; mark my words." He turned away from her and left the room. Balsa noticed that he was heading for the kitchen.

Balsa stood by the fire across from the innkeeper's friend. He reached up and extended his full glass to her. "Would you like some, miss?"

"Thank you, but I'll decline. I don't like to drink on an empty stomach."

The innkeeper returned to the room, carrying a pot and a wooden plate. "It's not good for your health to go to bed hungry," he said gruffly. "Maybe the young can get away with skipping a meal or two, but these old bones won't have it." He set the pot over the fire to warm its contents.

"I know you're a fairly young woman. You have to keep yourself healthy so you can bear children."

Balsa burst out laughing. "I'm already in my mid-thirties."

The innkeeper glanced over at Balsa. "So? My mother had me when she was forty-five."

Balsa hadn't gotten a lecture (even a gentle and well-meaning one) about settling down and having children for a long time, so she wasn't entirely sure how to respond.

The innkeeper lifted the lid off the pot, revealing a stew called raru. There must have been some left over in the kitchen. There was a slight film of oil over the top, but that vanished when the innkeeper stirred it. Steam rose from the pot, spreading a pleasant aroma through the room.

"My mother bore twenty children between the ages of sixteen to sixty. Eighteen of them lived to adulthood. My wife had had ten children, and seven lived to grow up."

Balsa frowned a little at him.

"I was a complete bachelor until I was thirty years old, and I loved my wild, free single life. Even after I settled down, I lived the way I always had for a while. It was only after my son turned five that I started feeling the urge to settle down somewhere. That's when my friend over there told me that it was time I accepted my settled-down life as it was.

"You don't think, when you're young, that you'll ever want a quiet life for yourself. But I can say for certain that it's a pleasant sort of life."

"I told you no such thing," the old man sitting near the fire said. "I said that if you didn't accept your life and settle down soon, you'd wind up like a sakawa or wild salmon, always swimming upstream."

The innkeeper faced his friend and nodded. "You yourself were once an itinerant gambler, flitting from face to place like a songbird. And look at you now! So stern and serious. You make sure the people who come in are fed and watered. It's hard to remember you as you were then..."

The innkeeper paused in his lecture to Balsa and became engrossed in conversation with his friend. After the stew was fully heated and bubbling, the innkeeper's friend ladled some into a wooden bowl and passed it to Balsa.

Balsa sat down with her stew in front of the fire and listened to the two men talk as she ate. When she finished her bowl, she rose and thanked the innkeeper and his friend, then returned to her room.

This inn was quite large, so there were many rooms lined up along a long hallway. Everything was still and silent; most of the guests must already be asleep. The hallway was silent and cold.

Balsa entered her room and sat down on her bed. She looked into the darkness for a little while, then faced her window, where she could see the lights of a gambling den across the street. She heard men's shouts and women's high-pitched laughter, carried on the wind, sometimes loud and sometimes soft like the rising and swelling of a tide.

Balsa removed her coat and top layer and stretched out on the bed. The twine she kept at her waist brushed against her stomach. She removed her leather boots, got herself settled and fell asleep.

She awoke at dawn to early morning light streaming in through her window. She heard people stirring and beginning their work for the day. The appetizing smell of frying unleavened bread reached her nose; she recognized it as bam. Fried bam was a common breakfast for people in Rota. The smell of it cooking wafted through the entire inn.

Although Balsa was awake, she found it hard to shake the feeling of her dream. She'd dreamed that Tanda had been asleep in her arms; she still felt over-warm with the idea of it.

Balsa opened her eyes and surveyed her dim room with a slightly disappointed air.

Time to settle down...huh?

Of course Balsa wasn't really ready for that, but she felt like she was; she was still immersed in the warmth and memory of her dream. The dream was something that she wanted, but she still felt like it was something she couldn't do.

Balsa's life and livelihood were, by nature, violent. She'd spent her entire life making her living in the same way and didn't know how to do anything else. If she gave up and settled down now, all she would have were bloody, bitter memories of who she used to be.

Because her work was violent, she could easily die at any time. She had to be prepared for that. Every town, every back alley, every side-street she traveled down felt somehow temporary and unreal; just because she entered them didn't mean she would come back out alive.

If she died on a job, Tanda wouldn't know—possibly for a long time. In her mind, he was always in Torogai's hut, waiting for her. She did

sometimes think that her way of life was cruel and unfair to Tanda, but she honestly and seriously knew of no other way to live. She was still looking for a better answer to the end of her life.

Balsa sighed and shifted on her bed so that she was staring at the ceiling. She slapped herself lightly on both cheeks to help snap herself out of her dream.

War in New Yogo would likely begin at the start of the new year. That was what Hugo had told her. Chagum's letter had begged her to flee to the mountains with Tanda before the war broke out.

The armies of opposing countries usually bore the brunt of the war in terms of loss of life, but Balsa knew that the Talsh invaders likely wouldn't stop at killing New Yogo's soldiers. Innocent lives would be lost. People would be displaced from their homes and lose everything they'd built up and worked for.

Balsa had spoken to many merchants from southern Rota during her investigation of Chagum's whereabouts. Most of them weren't worried too much about the war, as they could easily see how they could profit from it. One man she'd talked to had experienced war and violence before: he'd seen young children cut down before his very eyes, yet still espoused much the same view as his fellow merchants in southern Rota. Thinking about that man made Balsa's blood run cold.

Soldiers would attack, burn, steal and kill—that was what war meant. Tanda and Torogai were somewhat removed from towns and the capital and would probably be safe for a while, but Asra and

Chikisa were right in the main invasion path. Martha's store in Shirogai was under immediate threat. Balsa should probably warn her to evacuate before the war started. She should take Martha, Asra and Chikisa back to Tanda and Torogai and hide in the mountains, like Chagum had said. Hunters' Hole was a nice, secluded place to hide.

I have to go back to New Yogo.

Balsa was only one person. She wasn't strong enough or influential enough to stop a war between nations—but she was strong enough to protect the people who were most important to her.

Balsa heard doors opening into the hallway near her room. People who were planning to leave early lined up in the hallway to take their morning meal.

Balsa pushed back her blankets and placed her feet upon the cold ground. She shook herself a little and started packing. When she opened her pack to pull out fresh clothes, something fell out of it.

It was a length of twine—the same kind of twine she wore at her waist. It was soaked with blood. She realized that this was the same twine she'd given Hugo to stop the bleeding when he'd taken the arrow out of his leg. She bent to retrieve the twine and saw that it was wrapped around a length of red cloth. When she unfolded the cloth, there were letters written in precise Yogoese.

Thank you for this twine. I wanted to tell you something in exchange for giving it to me.

The Nanyoku spies have sent assassins after Crown Prince Chagum. It seems that he saw the face of the Talsh's Kanbalese accomplice on accident. I don't expect them to let him live. According to the reports I've received, the Kanbalese spy is the linchpin of the entire invasion strategy.

They know that Crown Prince Chagum is headed to see Prince Ihan. They won't have any trouble tracking him. You've likely dealt with assassins before, but these men aren't to be taken lightly.

I am working, in my own way, to secure a different outcome for the future. When you read this, I pray that you will protect Crown Prince Chagum.

Balsa stared at Hugo's letter in shock. A chill went up her spine and spread through her entire body.

A Kanbalese spy...so Kanbal has already fallen to the Talsh, then?

And Chagum had seen him. If he was really as important as Hugo's letter seemed to suggest, then Balsa was certain that the Nanyoku spies were motivated to kill him at any cost.

But Chagum's being protected by the Kashal. I'm sure they know how not to be tracked, at least.

Balsa tried to reassure herself with that thought, but she felt nothing but unease. She had expected that the southern clan lords would chase after Chagum, but she hadn't expected Talsh assassins as pursuers. Would the Kashal be a match for them? Would they really be able to protect Chagum?

She might be able to warn the Kashal, but they would have no reason to believe information offered by a Talsh spy. It would also take time to warn them.

How long ago did he slip this letter into my pack?

She'd been confined in the Kashal village for three days. Unless Hugo had found her and slipped it into her pack without knowing while she'd been confined, she had to assume that at least three days had passed since he'd written this letter. Talsh assassins were moving north quickly. Maybe she could catch up to Chagum on horseback.

Balsa clenched the red cloth in both fists and stood up. The choice before her was simple, but not easy. She could flee to the mountains with Asra, Chikisa and Tanda—or chase after Chagum and hope that she arrived before the Talsh assassins did.

Even if she rushed after Chagum now, she might not make it. The Kashal were with him and should, reasonably, be expected to protect him. But she still wanted to confirm that he was safe with her own eyes.

If she traveled at all speed toward Jitan from here, it would take a minimum of ten days. Could she really reach Jitan, make sure Chagum was safe, then backtrack to Shirogai and Tanda's hut in the mountains before the war started?

Balsa kept the red cloth clenched in her fists and stared at the wall. Shirogai was about five days' ride from the border of Sangal by horse. She didn't know exactly where the war's first battles would be fought, but the Sangal border seemed likely to be a war zone. It wouldn't be easy to travel through there once battles started being fought.

She had more reasons not to go to Shirogai than to go. She was worried for Asra and Chikisa, but Martha was far from helpless. Balsa knew that Martha would protect the children. Chagum felt far more alone and vulnerable to her. The Kashal would defend him from danger, but they had no love for or friendship with Chagum himself. They operated on the orders of a distant prince who might change his mind at any time. The more she examined the situation, the more Balsa realized that Chagum was at the center of a whirlpool, in constant danger of being pulled under—along with everyone close to him.

Balsa took a deep breath, then made her decision. White light shone through her window and touched her face. She heard people lining up with their luggage and belongings on the street outside. The misty figures of boats appeared on the river: the morning's first fishermen, back with their catch.

Balsa took up her pack and settled it over her shoulders. Then she gripped her spear and left her room at a pace not much slower than a sprint.

Part 3 - Blizzard

Chapter 1 - Advance Warning

Tanda climbed up the steep mountain path to the summit and gazed down at Terano plain. Tanda held his breath. The vast plan spread out before his eyes; there seemed to be no end to it. The rice fields had recently been harvested; stalks and stubble floated in the wind. The mountains sloped the land, creating peaks and valleys that were visible from his high vantage point. Taking it all in like this reminded Tanda that New Yogo was a fertile country with rich soil. If he squinted, he could see other fields that were growing crops other than rice.

He wondered what the first Yogoese settlers must have thought when they'd crossed the sea and seen the land for the first time. They'd called it New Yogo, in their arrogance, but for all the time that had passed, the southern part of the nation was still full of Yakoo settlements and steeped in Yakoo culture. Terano was a Yakoo name for this place, which meant "wide field" in their language. Terano plain was New Yogo's breadbasket; no other place in the country produced as much rice and grain.

The plains were bordered here by the Yauru mountains and the Tohata mountain range to the east. The plain was interrupted by the Amata mountain range to the west; that mountain range was blanketed by an evergreen forest that stayed lush and vibrant even in winter.

The Blue Bow River flowed through Terano plain. It had rained for several days prior to this, but today's weather was clear; the river looked like a strip of light gleaming in the sun. The ocean was faintly visible at the river's mouth in the far distance.

New Yogo's border with Sangal to the west began at the Tohata mountain range. New Yogo had some authority over the waters outside its port, but New Yogo was not largely seafaring and rarely made use of this authority.

Tanda saw a smooth stretch of white beach in the distance. If invaders truly were intending to come, he would expect them to land on the beach rather than try traversing the mountains. Attacking Terano plain from the coast would be very easy; it didn't take a military strategist to see that.

New Yogo's generals and military veterans believed that the first large battle of the war would likely take place on Terano plain. At least two thousand soldiers were already stationed here, regimented into seven different units. The unit that Tanda was traveling with was approaching the train from the north. They'd followed the line of the river for a while until they were forced to turn into the mountains to take on more recruits. Every village the unit passed gave up ten more men for the war effort. Their names were read out in each village square as families trembled with dread.

Tanda's unit had started with forty men. By the time they reached the plain, there would be ninety—or maybe more. They'd stopped at five villages so far. When they descended from the mountains and reached the river again, they were assigned tasks and told to either float down the river in boats to reach a larger camp, or follow the horses and guard the supplies that were heading south. No man who did not come into the army mounted was given a horse. They were too rare and precious for most soldiers to even consider using.

The horses currently in the army were also, typically, bought or conscripted from villages. Horses were vital for farmers; this was known even in the imperial court, so most villages were compelled to give up only one or two of their horses for the war. Some villages were so poor that no one had a horse at all; the soldiers recruited there often carried supplies and luggage in a horse's stead.

The village that Tanda was originally from had only one horse: an old one, very thin and not able to lift much weight. Still, the soldiers taking the horse was a blow to the village. Tanda was so sorry for it that he wound up lightening its heavy load by taking additional supplies into his own pack. Carrying the extra weight for the long journey made

Tanda's back, neck and legs ache and twitch from exhaustion. Everything hurt; most nights, he couldn't even sleep.

The old horse seemed to understand Tanda's consideration. He would often walk beside Tanda and try to rub noses with him as a sign of affection. The horse's name was Hocha, which meant "uncle" in the Yakoo language. While it was true that Hocha was old and no longer very strong, his eyes were sharp, and he was sure-footed even on narrow and treacherous mountain paths.

"Hey there, Hocha," Tanda said. "It's been a long day, but we'll rest soon."

Tanda's unit started descending the mountain in neat, orderly lines. Tanda paused in his march to pat Hocha on the neck. He tried not to think about the plain below becoming a battlefield where people would lose their lives. The mere idea made his chest hurt. The plain was so bright and beautiful and pure; he couldn't believe that anything so terrible as a battle would ever take place upon it.

Tanda sighed and followed his unit down the mountain.

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Tanda's unit reached the edge of the plain at sunset. The vast field had become a huge military encampment; Tanda saw tents lined up for as far as his eyes could see. The gold thread on the flags flying above the camp glinted in the red light of the sun.

Most of the men already present in the camp had started preparing dinner. Smoke from a dozen nearby fires wafted into the air. Horses were kept tethered at one end of camp: hundreds of them. Tanda was assaulted by all the smells: of cooking, of smoke, of men and of horses.

"Northern unit, keep advancing," the leader of the unit called out. Tanda passed by armed and armored soldiers eating dinner and felt a painful pang of hunger. He kept his eyes straight ahead and kept advancing with Hocha next to him.

Tanda was astonished when he and his unit arrived at the place they were assigned. Their camp was on a ravine that bordered some grassland; fully four hundred men were already encamped there. There was certainly enough space for everyone—including the newcomers—to sleep, but there wasn't space for tents. Tanda saw cooking fires dotted here and there, but there wasn't a single tent to be seen.

Ordinarily, people would likely have chosen to split up by village or by family to give them greater ease as they slept, but there simply wasn't space. They would all be sleeping together under the stars tonight, and mostly among strangers.

"Disperse, five villagers to a fire," the leader called out, "but first, take care of the horses. And help the others finish digging latrines before nightfall. You can have your dinner then."

The men surrounding Tanda moved sluggishly, but they did as ordered and started taking care of the horses.

"Didn't you say something different before? I thought we could rest as soon as we finished making camp," one man grumbled.

"That's true, but our superiors still need help finishing their preparations for the night. You can rest after."

Some of the men in Tanda's unit whispered to one another—mostly complaints, from what Tanda could hear, but no other man was brave enough to make his objections aloud. Several of them had been whipped by officers for their complaints on the way here.

Eight men commanded the regular foot soldiers assembled on the plain. They used special care to separate themselves from regular soldiers and workers in both their words and their actions. Tanda had heard several of them claim that their knowledge of weapons and warfare made them more qualified to lead. They didn't accept advice or suggestions from the regular soldiers—or complaints, either.

The commanders rode around the camp on their splendid horses while Tanda and the other men worked, giving grand speeches about the glory of protecting one's homeland and risking their lives for greatness and renown. Tanda had heard such speeches before, too. The

commanders claimed that only a few days remained before the men assembled here would be tested in battle.

One of the commanders lifted up a man who had been hanged earlier in the day: a deserter. Every man from his village had been whipped to within an inch of their lives as part of his punishment.

The assembled men looked at the dead man and listened to what had happened to the men of his village in clear astonishment. Most of these men had never left their home villages even once before being marched here. They'd never seen the commanders or any soldiers or imperial guards, either, except for when it was time to collect taxes. The appearance of these men—armored from head to toe with swords bared and sharp enough to cut men's throats—was utterly terrifying. More than one man trembled as he worked.

Soldiers—men who fought and killed—were not the same as these ordinary farmers and innkeepers from ordinary villages. Despite their fear, many of the regular soldiers continued their quiet grumbling as they worked. They had no other way to make their displeasure known.

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Night was always colder than the day. Tanda hadn't slept outside in a long time and found this night unusually cold. Men gathered around cooking fires and ate simple evening meals with blankets wrapped around their shoulders.

Tanda heard joints cracking as he lay down. The journey had been long; all his limbs were tired. He shifted on the ground, trying to get comfortable. His blanket was over his head to help him conserve warmth, but his breath still steamed in front of his face. He was so tired that he didn't care; he was asleep almost as soon as he hit the ground.

When Tanda awoke, it was still night. Someone was screaming. The fire near him had died almost to embers; the light of the moons was all he really had to see by. There was a group of men standing around someone; Tanda heard the sound of blows and winced.

"Stop it! You'll cause nothing but more problems for us!"

The only response was a choked-off sob. Someone groaned, then cried out as they were struck. Tanda saw no sign of any of the commanders about; everyone he could see was a regular soldier. All the officers slept in tents in the larger camp—that must be why none of them had heard this commotion.

Tanda stood up. He knew that interfering might be stupid in this case, but he was awake, and he wasn't the sort of man who could pretend he hadn't seen someone being beaten. He approached the men and saw that there were three of them, all surrounding a crouched-down figure. The men were kicking whoever was in the middle.

"What's going on?" Tanda asked.

The men turned to face him. "None of your business, you bastard. Go back to sleep," one of them said. The man's voice cracked as he spoke, from nerves or fear, maybe. Tanda looked at his face and noticed that he was very young. Tanda kept coming closer until he could see whoever the men were beating better.

"I heard you and woke up," Tanda said. "You'll get the commanders mixed up in this if you don't keep it down."

The three men snapped their mouths shut. They understood what the consequences of waking any of the commanders would be. Then the young man who had spoken previously seized Tanda's collar and hissed, "And who are you, to interfere in our business? Leave us alone."

Tanda stared at the young man and didn't say a word. The young man spat, then slugged Tanda hard in the gut. The pain was sharp, severe, and immediate, like something had broken open inside him. It was hard to breathe. Tanda crouched protectively over his stomach and looked down.

"Oi!" One of the other men said. He turned toward the young man who had punched Tanda, then gestured around. Seven more men around camp had stood up after being awakened by the noise. The young man went pale. All of the men who'd stood up were from Tanda's

village; they glared at the young man with clear resentment in their eyes.

The three young men who'd caused the commotion quickly retreated to their own cooking fire at a sprint, leaving Tanda and the man they'd been beating alone. "Are you all right?" Tanda asked, rubbing the man's back. He, too, was young.

The man lifted his head and nodded. He was trembling slightly. Tanda thought that he couldn't possibly be any older than eighteen. He was pitifully thin with arms like ropes; only his eyes showed any sign of life and vitality at all. His face was covered in blood.

"I'll treat your injuries," Tanda said. "Please come with me."

"Thank you," the man said.

Tanda supported the man so that he could stand. The men who had been beating him before glared at him and Tanda as they moved, but they didn't speak. They returned to their sleeping places and lay back down.

Tanda didn't know any of the men of his home village well and had usually kept some distance between him and them as a matter of course, but he was deeply grateful to them now. He hadn't expected them to be such staunch allies in support of one of their own.

Tanda guided the young man to the side of the slow-trickling tributary of the Blue Bow river and helped him sit down. "Can you wash your own face? If not, I can do it."

The young man nodded. "Thanks. I can do it." He cupped water in his palms and brought it up to his bloody, bruised face, wincing all the while. Tanda fished around in his pack for something wrapped in oiled paper. He found what he was looking for and unwrapped it, revealing a powder that could help stop bleeding. He dusted his hands and made a sort of paste to place over the cuts on the man's face.

"Some of these injuries are older," Tanda said with a frown. "They must have been beating you for a long time."

The man nodded.

"Why?" Tanda asked.

The young man answered in fits and spurts, as if he wasn't quite sure what to say. "They tell me to shut up all the time. 'We can't sleep with you near us.' That's what they say. I feel like I'm stuck in a dream all the time and I can't wake up. I thought that would stop happening after I left home, but it's even worse here."

The man's voice hadn't dropped yet; Tanda thought he sounded more like a girl than a boy—and certainly not like the man he was. The man sank into silence.

"What kind of dreams?" Tanda asked.

The young man didn't answer immediately. When he did, it was like he was spitting teeth. "Run! Run! Get away from here!...It's like there's a voice inside me, screaming—all the time."

He was shaking again. Tanda put a hand on his shoulder.

War is terrifying. It's no surprise that he just can't stand it anymore.

The man's eyes suddenly opened wide. He seemed to be seeing through Tanda as he faced the mountains and stared fixedly.

The air around Tanda felt threatening and oppressive. Goosebumps rose along his arms. He prepared the words of a spell to help calm himself. There was a loud sound like the rushing of water. All of the birds in the forest behind him took flight at the same time, calling in a cacophony to one another in the night sky. Something emerged from the grass at the foot of the mountain; it was difficult to tell what it was. A fox? Another wild animal? Whatever it was ran toward the river at top speed, then jumped over it and concealed itself in the tall grass.

That was only the first beast to flee the mountain. Others followed it, crossing over the river in droves.

The man in front of Tanda shook violently. His neck moved back and forth as he shouted at the top of his lungs, "There's danger here! Run! Get away!"

Animals kept crossing the river and fleeing the mountain. More soldiers woke and rubbed their eyes. Tanda stood up and took the shouting man by the hand, then led him toward the other sleeping soldiers.

"Everyone, up!" Tanda yelled. "The animals are fleeing the mountain! We're in danger here!"

Most people didn't react to Tanda's words, but a few did get themselves up and start running. More than half looked up at him with perplexed, disbelieving faces, clearly resentful over being woken up.

Tanda called out to everyone to run one more time, then paused and took a breath. The earth shook beneath his feet. A low roar emanated from the ground like a shout. The trees in the forest wavered and fell; Tanda heard them crashing down behind him in a sound like the wave of a tsunami.

There was a sound like distant thunder as the earth ripped itself asunder. Uprooted trees slid down the mountain and into the soldiers' camp. A landslide caused trees from farther up the mountain to skid down the slope at great speed along with a huge quantity of mud.

Someone screamed in the dark.

Tanda pulled the young man forward by the hand over the uneven ground, moving as fast as he could in an attempt to get them out of danger. He could do nothing but watch as the side of the mountain fell down upon them.

Tanda relaxed a little he looked at the encroaching earth. Landslides had been common this year in many places; it seemed this mountain was no exception. That meant that there had been a landslide here before. He could tell based on the bare patches of earth and gaps in vegetation that he could see. As terrible as this situation was, it could have been far worse.

He and the young man he was with were completely buried in earth before they could escape the danger. Tanda wriggled and managed to poke his head above the mud. The shifting mess around him was comprised of trees and river stones as well as mud, so he couldn't move very easily.

The landslide didn't last too long. Everything went eerily quiet when it was all over. Tanda looked around for the young man he'd lost track of after getting buried alive. He found him nearby and helped pull him up.

Tanda faced back toward the camp and squinted. Well over a third of the encampment had been buried in the landslide.

Tanda coughed and almost gagged; he had mud in his mouth. The young man next to him coughed so hard he almost doubled over, back into the mud. Tanda found his filthy hand and gripped it in his. He rubbed his back for him until he stopped coughing.

***

The men who'd survived the landslide searched for survivors, carrying pine torches aloft in the darkness. Rescuing Tanda and the young man proved difficult; they were wedged between two trees and the gap between them was so narrow that only two men could enter at a time to help haul them up.

By morning, the death count had been finalized: twenty-five men had been buried completely in the landslide. Two of the men who'd died were from Tanda's home village. The work began to start digging corpses out of the rubble, but it was hard work and took time. The eight commanders ordered all the survivors to gather and abandon their work cleaning up the landslide.

"We understand that this was a disaster, but we don't have time to keep digging and wasting time," one of them said. "You'll all be leaving this place at noon. We need to start putting strategies in place to defend against the enemy's cavalry forces. It's difficult work, but we expect all of you to cooperate."

The soldiers glanced at one another. Most of them were covered in mud from the landslide or from digging out friends and comrades after. Not content to mutter their discontentment, several men released primal shouts of rage. Searching for survivors and honoring the dead were not a waste of time.

No one knew who shouted first, but the shout was taken up by a dozen men, a hundred, more; the commander went pale and sped away on his horse. He was only twenty-five years old. He was a maroku—a

commander in charge of three hundred men—but for most of his tenure, that position had been a symbolic one, granted to him because of his family's rank. No one ever expected New Yogo to actually go to war.

His second-in-command rode up next to him. "Silence!" he called out. His second-in-command was nearing sixty years old and was a seasoned warrior. His family's rank was much lower than the commander's and his family were all considered lower-class warriors, but in an actual battle, his experience would certainly be of more use. He was specially selected for his position so that he could assist the commander in any way he could.

The disgruntled soldiers stopped shouting at his command, but they kept digging through the debris left by the landslide. Their rage was obvious in their faces and their movements.

The commander's second-in-command called out to the soldiers in a placating tone of voice. "I understand how you feel," he said. "There might still be some survivors buried under the rubble here. Leaving feels like abandoning them. But consider the situation we're in. This was a terrible disaster. How much time would it take for all of us to dig through it all to the bottom and recover everyone? Our orders were given long before this happened; we can't be expected to shirk them now. Even if we stayed here and dug until nightfall, we wouldn't finish the work. Do you intend to dig all day tomorrow, too, with the same result? We're needed elsewhere.

"It's a tragedy. I understand. But in the time it would take to save any potential survivors, they will likely perish where they're buried. We

can't spare the time to search for everyone, and even if we could, the chances of saving anyone else are slim."

The rage went out of the soldiers' movements. Grief and sadness replaced it, making their movements jerky and uncoordinated.

"You are soldiers. Soldiers die, but you are all alive. You can still save others in this fight. Think of your families, your children, and stay strong. If we fail to stop the enemy's cavalry from advancing now, many of your villages could be overrun by Talsh and Sangal. This is war, men. We expect the enemy to attack sometime within the next month. If we stay here much longer, we won't have any chance of stopping the cavalry forces. Our nation will be overrun with enemy forces instead of mud and stone and trees, but people will die just the same.

"Think about your children's faces. Pray for the strength to cut down our enemies when they attack. I'm sure the men who died here would forgive us so long as we protect their homes."
Many of the men digging whispered to one another. "We should eat. We have less than an hour left before noon."

The men began to disperse and pack up for departure. The commander and his second-in-command retreated to make preparations of their own. The diggers remembered that they were soldiers and looked at one another with wide-eyed expressions. Tanda stood alone among them, surrounded by whispers. He wiped the mud from his knees, then went into the forest alone.

There was a type of grass in the forest called suga, with broad, distinctive stems. He gathered up twenty-five stems of grass, then went back to the soldiers' camp. He asked the names of all those who were dead or missing and cut their names onto the grass with a small knife.

"You're a magic weaver, aren't you?" one of the soldiers asked him.

"I'm still an apprentice," he said sadly, "but I know enough to send their souls off properly, the way they deserve."

Several men clustered around Tanda and watched what he was doing. Tanda lined up the grass with all the missing or dead men's

names written on it on the ground. When he was finished carving all the names, he looked up.

"I will send their souls on from this world," he said. "Please pray for them so that they find their way safely."

The men nodded gravely. This was a solemn and sacred ceremony; they would do all they could to assist with it.

Tanda took the first blade of grass in his hand and began speaking the words that would send his soul to its rest after death. "Acham, become a bird, and fly away. Let the wind lift you into the sky to find your last resting place. Sleep. Your war is over. If you are ever reborn in this world, may your soul know peace." He took the grass in both hands and threw it high into the air.

The grass flashed with white light, then transformed into a bird. Tanda watched it fly higher and higher into the sky until it disappeared from view.

"Goodbye, Acham!" Many of the men waved at the bird. Some were crying. Tears streaked the mud on their cheeks. "Farewell."

The men howled with grief as Tanda laid the souls of their friends and families to rest. Their dead comrades would never go home. Tanda lifted each blade of grass one by one and sent them flying high into the sky.

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Tanda sought out the young man who'd been beaten the previous night before he and the other soldiers broke camp. He wanted to take a closer look at his wounds and make sure he was all right to travel.

He was astonished at how young the man looked in the clear light of the morning sun. "How old are you?" he asked.

"Fourteen," he said. "My brother was selected. I went in his place." Tears overflowed in his eyes.

Tanda patted him on the head reflexively. *He's just a boy.* The boy jerked away from Tanda like a wild dog, watchful and wary, but then leaned into him and rested his forehead against Tanda's chest.

Tanda knew that this boy's story was common. There were many young men whose parents were dead, or whose fathers had been taken already in previous recruitment campaigns; the young men and boys left had no one to protect them when the recruiters came again. There were several men in Tanda's unit who were younger than eighteen.

"My father picked me," the boy said. "He said I was weird and that the family didn't need me. Not as much as my older brother."

Tanda hugged him tighter and whispered, "Weird, huh? I got that a lot, too, when I was younger."

The boy looked up at him in surprise. His face was red from weeping; snot dripped from his nose. "You...too?" he asked tentatively.

Tanda smiled kindly. "I can see the souls of the dead. A lot of people thought I was creepy as a kid. Why did your father think you were weird?"

The boy gritted his teeth. His words came slowly, as if he were carefully selecting every single one. "I see things that aren't there. I see rivers when everyone else sees a mountain, and bright lights when there's no light, and...well, things like that."

Tanda's eyes widened. "What do you see here? Anything?"

"We're underwater," the boy said with an expression of horror. "So far under, there's no bottom. I see strange things swimming around me, so many of them—I can't even count them all."

Tanda stared at the boy for a few moments, then decided to verify if what the boy was saying was true. He muttered an incantation to open his eyes to the world of Nayugu.

Gem-toned bright blue water surrounded him on every side. If he craned his neck, he could see the water's surface and the sun above it. So many creatures and fish surrounded him that it was hard to see very far in any direction except upwards. He'd never seen so many Yona Ro Gai gathered in a single place before. Golden fish swam in vast schools that swam right through Tanda. Dots of green and gold light sparkled and shone above his head, forming a river of light flowing from the south to the north.

Tanda returned to Sagu and sucked in a deep breath. The boy was looking at him with an expression of concern. *This boy is like Asra*, he thought. *He can see Nayugu.*

What Tanda had just seen reminded him of Asra's letter. The soldiers here couldn't be expected to listen calmly and ask questions of the boy as he had with Asra; he understood now why the boy had been so frequently attacked. Asra's dream had troubled her deeply—so much so that she'd traveled the long road from Rota to New Yogo with Martha and her brother in order to warn him and Balsa. He understood how

she felt now: knowing that she had to do *something,* but not knowing what she had to do.

Asra had that dream every night for months. She cried out in her sleep even though she can't speak.

Whatever was going on in Nayugu was something that only natural magic weavers like Asra and Chagum could sense. He gasped as he thought, *Maybe they're only the first to notice, the first to see. They're our advance warning that something is very wrong.*

Like canaries in a coal mine, or the weakest animals in an ecosystem, there were always some animals who either sensed or suffered from danger long before everything else did. In Yogoese, these creatures were called o-chal my by magic weavers: sometimes the weakest of the herd, but more often the first to perceive danger. The term wasn't commonly used among most people; only magic weavers knew it. Tanda had learned of o-chal from Torogai.

Tanda remembered that the birds had been the first to fly from the trees before the earthquake that caused the landslide came. The boy had known about the landslide before Tanda; he'd shouted for everyone to run away...and been beaten for his trouble.

Even among populations of animals, some individual members reacted faster and understood more about a situation than others. Tanda had wondered for a long time why people like Asra, who could see Nayugu and Sagu simultaneously, were born. One possible explanation was so that people like her and the boy in front of him could warn others of danger before it happened.

But Asra's warning had been vague. The boy's had as well. What they feared wasn't clear enough to convey to others. Tanda knew that events in Nayugu could affect Sagu; he assumed that Asra's warning, and possibly the boy's, came from the interplay between the two worlds in some way.

If only Master Torogai were here...I know she'd be able to figure this out.

Something was happening in Nayugu. He didn't know what, but he was determined to figure it out.

The war is coming. I might die. I need to tell Torogai what I know before it's too late.

"Are you all right, mister?" the boy asked.

Tanda smiled faintly. "I'm fine. My name is Tanda. What's your name?"

The boy smiled a little. "Kocha. It's good to meet you, Tanda."

"Kocha?" Tanda frowned. ‘Kocha' meant ‘tiny' in Yogoese.

Kocha grimaced. "People called me that for so long that it became my name. My dad decided that it should stay my name no matter how much I complained."

Tanda smiled in sympathy. The bells that signaled that it was time to depart chimed in the distance.

When o-chal gave the herd advance warning, the entire herd moved. But people were dispersed and didn't all belong to the same herd. There might not be a way to warn everyone—even if Tanda understood what the o-chal were trying to warn him about.

Men started lining up at their point of departure. Tanda followed them, walking with Kocha. This was the dividing line between peace and war. When they set out, they would be heading toward their first battle.

Tanda frowned as if he was in pain as men shuffled to their places. War was like the landslide. Even though he'd done his best to warn people of the danger, many men had still died. No amount of advance warning could save these men from what was to come.

Chapter 2 - The Kashal Return

Balsa urged her horse onward toward the north. She considered all the possible routes that Chagum and the Kashal could have taken as she rode. If they avoided the road and went through the mountains, they'd be safer from pursuers, but the journey would take more time. Balsa herself had no time to waste and opted to use the shortest route to get to Jitan.

Chagum and his escort had a long head start. If she had any chance of catching up to them before they were attacked, she would have to give up sleep. She spent a full day on horseback, taking her meals without even dismounting.

The horse couldn't tolerate that pace for long, so she changed horses at regular checkpoints that she knew of from her work as a bodyguard in Rota. She was price-gouged each time but she couldn't spare the time to haggle. She used most of the money Jin had sent for the horses; all in all, the only money she had left came from Sain and his family. Ordinarily she would be more frugal with her resources, but if money could grant her time, she'd willingly sacrifice all of it.

There were regular stops along the road for travelers; Balsa stopped at the largest of these for rest, but she never stayed longer than an hour. At one of these, she heard a group of guards discussing recent attacks and ambushes on the road. This route, usually quite safe, had become difficult to travel, seemingly overnight. She also heard that the southern lords had sent out pursuers in search of an escaped prisoner. She heard nothing of the prisoner's identity—or if the Kashal were protecting him or not.

The Kashal are spies and know a lot of secret ways.

Balsa remembered Tanda telling her that once. She felt vaguely reassured. There were likely Kashal concealed all around her in the tall grass as she traveled, even if she couldn't see them at all.

Keep him safe for me, she thought. She was exhausted, and could spare no energy at all except for prayer.

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Balsa passed the capital of Rota and kept traveling for three days. Her surroundings changed completely on the third day; the well-tended road surrounded by rich fields of vegetables and grain gave way to endless grassland. The weather became sharp and cold, with the wind acting as a stinging slap that kept her awake.

She was in northern Rota now. The year had been mild and the growing season unusually long, so all of Rota had brought in good harvests this year. The people of northern Rota were used to harsh winters and poverty, but this year, most of them should be able to pass the winter in relative safety and comfort. There was no widespread risk of starvation like there usually was.

Balsa stopped to rest at the small village of Odam, which was the closest settlement to Jitan. The vast plains of withered grass disappeared and were replaced by dark woods to either side of her as she approached the village. It had been ten days since she'd left Tsuram. Ordinarily, it would have taken her fifteen or sixteen days to make this journey—but now that she had, she could barely move. She had no choice but to rest for the night and try to recover her strength. She would be of no help to Chagum if she caught up to him now.

Balsa took a bath, ate wheat gruel sweetened with sakkau, and fell into a deep sleep. She spent half the night in vaguely remembered dreams, anxious to keep moving.

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Balsa awoke when she heard noises on the lower floor of the inn. The sky outside her window was gray with clouds, but Balsa could tell that

it was already morning. She heard raised voices through the floor below.

Balsa sat up, swung her knees around the edge of her bed and put her shoes on. When she went down to see what the noise was all about, she discovered a group of guards, most bearded, calling out loudly to one another. It seemed that they were supposed to have left at dawn, but there was some kind of delay.

"Right, let's take the path through Afam's sacred forest. It's closer to here than the main highway. My group always goes that way whenever we pass through here."

"But aren't there corpses littering that road?"

The bearded man spat, then nodded. "Yeah. They probably killed another one this morning. The road always stinks of blood."

"And you really want to travel along that path?"

The bearded man frowned. "Yes. But I understand why it makes you uneasy. All the dead that I've seen have been merchant types—but I don't think they were actually merchants, if you follow me. The swords they carry are good steel, and they know how to use them. Some of them had toughened skin under their chins from wearing helmets with neck straps. You only see that on soldiers."

The men around him sank into silence. Balsa approached the bearded man and asked, "How many dead are on that path?"

The bearded man faced her and answered, "Four people on the forest path near the temple. But the blood trails I saw there means there's more—they were just carried off. I'm positive that there are more dead bodies in the forest."

Balsa felt a chill spread throughout her body. The forest path led to Jitan—and it was littered with dead bodies of soldiers pretending to be merchants.

"Tell me a little more about what you saw in the forest," Balsa said.

"Don't tell me you're planning to head that way?" the bearded man asked. "I'd reconsider if I were you. With that much blood, I'd expect

the wolves to come out hunting soon."

Balsa shrugged. "I still want to know more."

The man gave her a hard look, then started talking.

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The sky outside was dark with storm clouds; the wind was freezing. Balsa pulled on a shuma face covering to keep warm, then headed down the forest path. Birds twittered brightly overhead as she passed underneath the trees.

Balsa went only a little way up the forest path by horse when she discovered the four dead bodies that the bearded man had told her about. The birds had already come to pick at them, but Balsa saw no wolf prints in the mud surrounding them, only jumbled footprints.

Balsa loosened her shuma face covering a little so she could smell the battlefield and try to determine exactly when this fight had happened. She had no doubt that this was an actual battle that had taken place between trained combatants on both sides; the weapons and footwork she could determine from the mess of boot prints proved that. Arrows had grazed tree bark and fallen into the soft ground.

She paused when she recognized the fletching on one of the arrows. It was the same kind of fletching she'd seen on the arrow that Hugo had pulled out of his leg. The feathers were dark and short, like she remembered.

Balsa saw traces of footprints heading away from the battle. She jumped off her horse and followed the trail. She was traveling through thick underbrush and had just passed an enormous tree when she felt an unmistakable sense of danger. She pressed herself to the ground in an instant and felt arrows pass above her head.

"Are you from Ahal Tohasa's village?" she called out. "I'm Balsa! I came to help you!"

The woods were silent. Balsa heard people standing up to either side of her. Balsa stayed crouched on the ground and tried to make herself as small a target as possible.

"Are you really Balsa?" a man asked. He sounded hesitant.

Balsa raised her head slowly. The man who'd guided her to see Ahal was there, standing a little off to the side. His head was bandaged; blood had soaked through the white cloth. He had his bow drawn and appeared fearful, but he relaxed his shoulders a little when he recognized Balsa.

"You startled me," he said. "I thought the other attackers had already sent out more men." He set aside his bow and approached her.

Balsa frowned. "Who were you attacked by? Southern Talsh army spies?"

The young man nodded. "They ambushed us at dawn. We took care of them, as you saw, but there are many wounded on our side. I'm guarding the path. I'm supposed to run and warn the others if more enemies show up."

Balsa nodded in understanding. "What happened to Crown Prince Chagum?" she asked hoarsely.

The young man smiled. "He's fine—perfectly safe. We sent him before us on another road. He'll likely reach Jitan very soon."

Balsa frowned a little. "So you split your forces? Is that wise? Wouldn't it be safer if you'd all stayed together? He might be attacked again."

The young man's smile deepened. "I don't think so. These spies stumbled upon us on accident, I think—there's no sign that they planned or wanted to attack us. But even if they did—well, that's why I'm here, to watch this path in case anyone tries to follow us."

Balsa relaxed a little. Splitting their forces wasn't an entirely bad idea; they could confuse the trail by sending Chagum along one road and half their forces along another.

"I see," Balsa said. "Ahal's smart."

"No—I mean, yes, of course our leader is smart, but it doesn't take a tactical genius to see the advantages in our current position." He was still smiling.

Balsa remembered her first impression of Ahal and laughed a little at herself. She was familiar with this area, and more familiar with Rota than Balsa was. It was clear that she'd prepared for every foreseeable situation.

The young man stood looking at Balsa for a long moment. "We met Shihana at an inn five days ago," he said in the breathless voice of someone hopelessly excited.

Balsa frowned as if she'd just smelled something nasty.

The young man composed himself. "Ah, right—I sometimes forget that you and Shihana are bitter enemies—"

"—isn't she a criminal?" Balsa cut in. "Why do you admire her so much if she's been cut off from your number for her crimes?"

"It's not so easy to cut off family," he said. "It's true that she's committed grave crimes. But she's considered the best sword wielder and warrior in all of Rota. The southern clan lords are already putting their war plans into motion. The country will be split in half in a long and bloody conflict. We need every strong warrior on our side that we can possibly get—and that includes Shihana." The young man's face was bright red.

"Did Ahal tell you all that?" Balsa asked quietly.

The young man's expression brightened softly. "Our leader is deeply compassionate and generous-minded. While she and Shihana have their differences, they work together."

Balsa felt a sudden premonition of dread. "Let me guess...Shihana is leading the part of your forces that's protecting Crown Prince Chagum. I'm right, aren't I?"

The young man nodded. "Shihana told us which road the enemy spies came up from. Her side has more powerful warriors than ours, so her group was chosen to escort Crown Prince Chagum."

Shihana was probably trying to get back into Prince Ihan's good graces by exposing the plotting of the Talsh and southern clan lords, using Crown Prince Chagum's testimony as proof. She was motivated to keep him safe, but her motivations were as self-serving as always. Ahal likely understood what Shihana was after as well, and had ordered her own Kashal tribe to work alongside Shihana's.

There was likely some truth to the young man's impassioned speech. Shihana was an undisputed master of her weapon and had a gift for tactics and strategy. She was also unshakably loyal to Prince Ihan. War was coming—war that would rip apart Rota and destroy its very foundations. It would be foolish to cast aside Shihana as an ally in such a case.

Balsa knew all this about Shihana, but what she remembered most about her was her cruelty and rage. She didn't like the idea of Shihana protecting Chagum at all, but she also didn't think that Shihana would allow any harm to come to him. Chagum wanted to reach Prince Ihan no matter what. Shihana might be the best choice, in the given circumstances, to make that happen. It was clear that this young man, and likely several others, believed in Shihana's abilities. They'd likely agreed to let her go with Chagum because they'd believed he would be safe.

I sure hope Ahal thought this all the way through.

Balsa sighed, then said, "You did well for yourselves here, coming away from this attack with some people injured and no one dead. How many enemies attacked you?"

The young man grinned faintly at the praise. "Ten, but they weren't really all that strong of fighters. We had injuries on our side only because there were so many of them. We killed four; the rest fled. Some of them were injured, too. If they didn't get away, I expect they became food for the wolves."

Balsa frowned deeply. So the attackers hadn't been great warriors, even though they'd been armed well. Hugo's letter claimed that Talsh's

southern army spies were expert assassins. Balsa doubted that these dead men were those same elite fighters.

Talsh spies were clever. The main force likely took the other path—and were headed directly for Chagum.

Balsa froze to the spot. The Kashal didn't know that the Talsh had sent out elite spies to hunt down Chagum. They'd made great speed to reach Prince Ihan's palace after Chagum's escape from Tsuram, but those spies were now right on top of them and would likely risk anything to prevent Chagum from meeting with Prince Ihan.

The Talsh assassins had been ordered to kill Chagum because he'd seen the face of their Kanbalese co-conspirator. They wouldn't let him reach Prince Ihan's palace; she suspected they were lying in wait somewhere along the road.

Balsa sprinted back to the place where she'd left her horse and galloped up the main road to Jitan.

Chapter 3 - Prince Ihan's Castle

The clouds in the sky above were thick and gray; the air smelled like snow. Cooking fires from around Prince Ihan's palace shone brightly and sent their smoke trailing upwards. The palace was surrounded by pitched tents full of soldiers. Their horses were tethered or penned nearby, stomping their hooves and shifting in protest at the sudden cold shift in the weather.

Prince Ihan entered his reception hall a little past noon. The hall's walls were thick to keep out the winter chill and the wind; there was a large hearth built along one side of the room where a roaring fire was set. Prince Ihan saw many men gathered around a desk on the far side of the room. The flickering light of the fire shone on their faces.

There was a large map made of parchment spread out on the desk. The men were poring over it, pointing to locations and making tallies on their fingers.

"Ah. So lord Radam is closest to the southern border after all—but he's always been loyal. I'm certain he'll support King Yosam. How many men do we have stationed there? Two hundred? Three hundred?"

"Closer to four hundred, I think."

Prince Ihan surveyed the lords as they counted up his forces and sighed internally. He was worried for his brother; he hadn't been this sick in a long time. *I just want him to get better. Please.*

If King Yosam recovered, the southern clan lords might be convinced to support him. But that seemed like a vain hope at the moment. That was why both sides were counting their forces and considering what their next moves should be.

Prince Ihan's forehead creased as he looked down at the map. A bell rang outside the door to the hall.

"Prince Ihan, you have a request for an audience," a servant called out.

"Let them in," Prince Ihan shouted, lifting his eyes from the map. "Bring them here!"

The servant withdrew, then said, "Balsa the spear wielder requests a private audience," he said.

"Who?" Prince Ihan seemed surprised. His expression became brooding.

"She requests an immediate audience, Your Majesty. I know you are currently engaged in a meeting, but she insists that what she has to say to you cannot wait."

Ihan blinked. "All right. I'll meet with her." He faced the northern clan lords, who were all deep in thought and staring down at the map on the desk. "I'm going to take a break. Please continue the war council without me."

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The hallway outside the council room was freezing. Ihan walked briskly toward his own personal study, where he was accustomed to receiving guests. He reached his study, sat down, then rang the bell that signaled that he was ready for Balsa to enter.

The door to the study opened, revealing Balsa being led by a servant. Balsa entered in travel-worn clothes with a grim, exhausted expression on her face. The servant closed the door and walked away.

Balsa got to her knees and brought her forehead to the floor to show respect to Prince Ihan. "Thank you for agreeing to meet me on such short notice, Your Majesty."

Ihan smiled. "Lift your head, Balsa. You know there's no need to stand on ceremony with me."

Balsa stood up.

"Are Asra and Chikisa well?" Ihan asked.

"They were well the last time I saw them," Balsa said, a bit hesitantly. "They're currently living and working with a merchant in Shirogai named Martha. I haven't seen them in a while. I'm worried about them."

Ihan frowned. "It certainly looks like the Talsh are going to invade soon. I want to bring the children here so they'll be safe, but..." He smiled a little. "Well, even here isn't really safe, now, is it?"

Ihan looked about as tired as Balsa felt. She bowed a little and said, "Shall I get right to the point, Your Majesty?"

Ihan nodded. "Ahal sent me a message concerning you. I was under the impression that you'd be returning to New Yogo before the war started."

"I was about to return," Balsa said quietly, "but something changed my mind. I'm worried about Crown Prince Chagum. Has he come to see

you?"

Ihan's shoulders stiffened. He nodded. "Yes, Crown Prince Chagum was here. He told me a lot of vital news and information." Ihan sounded sad, somehow.

Balsa held her breath and waited for what Ihan would say next.

"Crown Prince Chagum is quite the hero. It's hard to believe he's only sixteen years old. He wanted to meet with my brother, but as he's indisposed, it fell on me to meet with him in Yosam's place." The sadness in his expression deepened. "I—I really, truly and honestly, wanted to agree to his proposal. I believe, as he does, that an alliance between Rota and New Yogo would save many lives. I believe it may be the only way to prevent the northern continent from being completely overrun by Talsh."

Ihan clenched his fists. "But I couldn't agree to it. I told Crown Prince Chagum my reasons. The first is the current situation in Rota. We're on the brink of plunging into civil war. The Talsh know this; they may have even instigated it to make conquering our country that much easier. All of the southern clan lords have been bought by Talsh. Any small risk or mistake now could send Rota into open revolt."

Balsa's chest hurt so badly that she couldn't breathe. Chagum had put his life on the line to get here and make his proposal to the King of Rota—and when he'd finally made it, he'd been rejected.

Prince Ihan gritted his teeth. "There's another problem, too—a big one. Crown Prince Chagum doesn't have the authority to make such an alliance. Not without his father's permission—and his father would never accept it."

Balsa frowned.

"We're aware of New Yogo's position on Talsh and the war. I have several spies stationed there; they send regular messages. The Kashal who arrived with him and the Kashal stationed in New Yogo both agree about the current situation in Crown Prince Chagum's homeland."

"I guess Shihana was stationed in New Yogo, too," Balsa muttered.

Ihan's eyes widened. "You knew about that? Then we can speak a good deal more freely. It's true that Shihana has committed grave crimes, but her strength in battle is needed now more than ever. I deemed it better for her to live and try to do something in our defense than to have her die and lose any possibility for her to redeem her past actions."

Prince Ihan smiled bitterly. "Perhaps you think I'm too soft. But I know that Shihana has always been loyal to me, and to the idea of Rota as a unified kingdom. She hasn't tried to revive Talhamaya or use her for Rota's armies; I think she gave up on that quite a while ago—and even if she hasn't, she is watched. She told me she would do anything to defend Rota from falling to the Talsh. I believe her."

Balsa stared at Prince Ihan in silence. She couldn't believe what he was saying. Shihana had nearly plunged Rota into war before, by trying to harness and control the power of the bloodthirsty god Talhamaya for her own purposes. Balsa didn't consider Shihana the least bit altruistic. If she was free—free and still had all her own power and contacts—then she was a threat.

"I have to think of the country in place of my brother right now," Prince Ihan said. "We are threatened by enemies from within and without. The King must always remain calm and composed in times like these—and I am his current representative. I intend to crush these enemies with all the skill and speed of a hawk hunting prey in flight. To do that, I need to be willing to make sacrifices—and compromises, even to my own honor."

Ihan's eyes gleamed bright with unshed tears. "Crown Prince Chagum would not be a calm ruler. He is not a calm prince. He is too single-minded and driven in this matter, not because he's young, but because he's stubborn and too kind-hearted. If he were an old man, he would still fail to be calm and level-headed here."

Balsa said nothing.

"So there you have it," Ihan said. "The other problem: the problem concerning Crown Prince Chagum's current position. The people of

New Yogo believes that a god protects them, and that the Mikado is that god. Crown Prince Chagum would have to be the Mikado in order to make any kind of alliance between nations. But that, too, is impossible—he faked his own death some months ago, and everyone in New Yogo thinks he's dead." Ihan grinned at Balsa. "Well, not everyone, but you take my point."

Balsa's expression conveyed nothing except profound loneliness.

"New Yogo is a strange country. If my son had gone to war and died, I would have mourned him openly with tears in my eyes, but the Mikado is of a different mind. He's never treated the Crown Prince with any sort of affection. And I know for certain that he wouldn't approve of Crown Prince Chagum's plan.

"The borders of New Yogo are closed to all foreign messengers. The Kashal sneak in and out, but any official message I sent to the Mikado requesting an alliance would be blocked at the border. The Mikado undoubtedly believes that by closing the borders, he is making the Talsh invasion his own personal problem. Perhaps he thinks to fight them off there, and decimate the Talsh forces so that they won't gain a foothold on the continent. I'm not so sure that strategy will be effective.

"Crown Prince Chagum is trying to save his nation, and ours, from Talsh. He may be right—there might only be one way to do it." Ihan paused.

Balsa understood what he wanted to say. If Chagum was going to make his plan succeed, he would have to openly defy his father. The only way for him to have the authority he required would be for the current Mikado to die.

Ihan watched the expression on Balsa's face change to one of understanding. "Crown Prince Chagum would never depose his father. Because of that, I can't agree to the alliance. The Mikado will not honor it. It would be meaningless."

Balsa breathed shallowly. Her heart was heavy; she was too distressed to form words. Prince Ihan placed his hand on her chin to tilt her head up.

"Our world is cruel, at times. I think it cruel to force someone with such a pure heart and unselfish motives to walk the path Crown Prince Chagum is currently on."

"Where is Crown Prince Chagum now?" Balsa asked.

Ihan dropped his hand to his knees, then said, "I offered to let him stay the night in this palace in secret, to rest and recover before beginning on another journey, but he refused. He's already gone."

"Where?"

"To Kanbal. Rota has refused his alliance. He hopes that the King of Kanbal might accept it." Prince Ihan appeared saddened again. "He said that if Kanbal and New Yogo agreed to be allies, Rota might be persuaded to join them. I made no promises. You understand my position. The King of Kanbal is no fool. He'll likely give Crown Prince Chagum the same answer I did, for similar reasons. He has his own people and his own lands to think of. If he sent soldiers to New Yogo, he'd be leaving Kanbal defenseless. I highly doubt he'll agree to the alliance."

"Is Crown Prince Chagum traveling alone?" Balsa asked.

Prince Ihan shook his head. "I sent two guards with him who know the way to Kanbal, as well as supplies and money, enough to get them there from here. Now you know everything that I do."

There was a touch of frost in the air; it would likely start snowing soon. Two guards in a forest of hungry wolves and pursuing spies didn't seem like much of a safe escort to Balsa. And Chagum wasn't used to traveling in mountains.

She suddenly realized that the Talsh assassins had never intended to attack Chagum here. They were waiting for him to be out in the open, exposed, on his way to Kanbal. Attacking him on the palace road, or in the palace itself, would be difficult, but attacking him outside of it, a fair distance away, would be comparatively easy.

Balsa was suddenly burning with impatience. "Thank you for granting me an audience," she said. "Please excuse me. I have to go."

Ihan stood up. "Do you intend to go after Crown Prince Chagum?"

Balsa nodded.

Ihan opened his mouth to say something, then took in Balsa's clear distress and thought better of it. Balsa bowed deeply to him, turned on her heel, and left. She was about to exit the door when her eyes fell on a length of twine wrapped around her right wrist. She remembered what Hugo had told her and turned to face Ihan once more.

"Prince Ihan, what do you think of these words: 'It would be better for the King of Rota and the King of Kanbal to form an alliance than it would be for either of them to ally themselves with New Yogo right now.'" She was paraphrasing, but that was the gist of Hugo's recommendation.

Ihan's eyes widened, but he didn't hesitate in his reply. "If the King of Kanbal asked me for an alliance, I would agree."

Balsa nodded, bowed, and then sprinted down the hallway and out of the palace.

Chapter 4 - Assassins

It started snowing. Softly at first, then in thick sheets drifting down from the clouds. Balsa took the same path that all those spies had died on that morning, urging her horse forward without pause. Prince Ihan had told her that Chagum had left the palace; he couldn't be far now.

The closest place to the palace from here with an inn was Toluan. She suspected that Chagum and his guides would head there to take shelter from the snow. It was also possible that they'd take shelter in animal pens and barns that were often used by poor farmers and ranchers during the winter, as Balsa had often done.

The snow kept falling and falling: it was a blizzard, a sudden one that made travel increasingly difficult. Snow was a common problem in northern Rota, however; there were many pens and barns dotting the road, set up for anyone's use.

The road to Toluan would usually be full of caravans and merchants, but very few people traveled during Rota's winter. Balsa encountered no one as she kept moving forward.

The sun began to set. The forest darkened on either side of the road and felt oppressive. Balsa felt the wind cut through her as the horse galloped on with its breath steaming in front of its face. She heard nothing but the stomping of hooves and the gasping breaths of her and the horse; it was like the entire road had been frozen in icy silence.

Balsa saw something moving on the road ahead of her. A wolf?

She pulled up a little on her reins, then retrieved her spear from where it was attached to her saddle. She removed the spear's scabbard and gripped her spear's shaft tightly.

She'd thought the animal in the road was a wolf, and it was—it was chewing on someone. When Balsa locked eyes with the wolf, it growled at her, baring its fangs. Balsa gritted her teeth.

Where there was one wolf, there were almost always more. Balsa soothed her horse's fear, then felled the wolf with a single blow. Others attacked, but she leaped off her horse and cut them down in a whirling motion, slicing through several at once. When four wolves were down, the rest retreated.

Balsa returned to her horse. It hadn't bolted, but it was shaking, so she patted and soothed it as best she could. Then she guided the horse closer to the person's corpse so that she could examine it more closely. She didn't recognize the man—and his face had recently been gnawed on—but she could tell that he'd been a Rotan soldier. He'd been cut open by a single slash from his right shoulder to his left hip. His collarbone and several ribs were broken.

His eyes were still open; Balsa closed them. She couldn't pause to bury him, nor could she risk resting here. The wolves might return at any time. She could do nothing except pray for the man's forgiveness at being left here. She stood up, bowed her head to the man, and mounted her horse.

If that man had been part of Chagum's escort, then the Talsh must have chosen to attack here. Balsa felt a twinge of genuine fear. She scanned the road impatiently, looking for more signs of the battle. She saw hoof prints in the snow, many of them; she pointed her horse in the direction of the most hoof prints and urged it into a gallop again.

She didn't go far before finding another Rotan soldier dead on the ground. She didn't get off her horse this time; that man had likely tried to buy time here for Chagum to run. And he'd been killed, too.

Balsa heard the sound of hoof beats in front of her: there were two riders in the near distance, though it was difficult to see them through all the snow. One of the riders was a man with a sword in his hand, chasing the other, who was fleeing desperately.

"Chagum!" Balsa howled. She threw her spear at the assassin, as fast and straight as an arrow. The man turned to avoid being speared in the back in the nick of time. She saw that the tip of her spear had grazed the neck of the man's horse.

The injured horse screamed and collapsed into the snow. The man leaped from the saddle and landed gracefully on the ground near his horse. He didn't spare Balsa a second glance; he turned swiftly and threw something hard at Chagum's horse.

Chagum fell off his agitated horse, but rose quickly to his feet. The assassin approached Chagum rapidly, sword in hand. Chagum unsheathed the sword at his hip and held it out defensively in front of him. The man crossed swords with Chagum, who blocked his blow—but Chagum's sword was broken.

Balsa stood up on her horse's back, releasing the horse's reins. She bent her knees, then leaped between the assassin and Chagum. The

assassin watched Balsa pass over his head; she landed a direct hit on him from above, so hard that they both went sprawling in the snow.

Balsa brought her knee into the man's ribs and gripped the hand that held his sword. The man transferred the sword from his right hand to his left in an easy, practiced motion and aimed his knee at Balsa's throat. She'd landed on top of him in the fall, but this maneuver allowed him to pin her down underneath him.

Balsa crossed her arms over her neck to prevent the man from slitting her throat easily with his sword. She felt the man's arms tighten on her, but used all her strength to twist free and jump up.

The man seemed stunned that she'd been able to free herself from his hold. They faced each other without moving for a few moments, each studying the other.

Balsa saw blood flowing onto the snowy ground; it was coming from the man's left arm. The man paid the injury no mind. The sword he gripped was unfamiliar in style, with a short handle and a wide blade. Balsa gulped; she had no chance of defeating him bare-handed. She might try to break his neck by feinting toward his injured arm and getting in close, but it was a gamble. Balsa had just decided to try it when she saw something moving out of the corner of her eye. It was Chagum's broken sword, which he'd thrown through the air right at the assassin.

The assassin deflected the weapon with an irritated expression.

"Balsa!" Chagum called out.

Her spear came flying right at her; she caught it in her hand and faced the advancing assassin. In a move so fast it was hard to see, she swung her spear up to strike the assassin in the head.

The assassin evaded her strike and slipped away from her. Balsa matched his movements perfectly, bringing the butt of her spear's shaft into his gut in a sharp motion. When he collapsed forward, she brought her spear up to strike him hard in the chin.

The assassin coughed blood, bending backward from the force of the blow. He grinned like a demon as he closed the scant distance between himself and Balsa, blood gleaming between his teeth. They passed one another at the same time: Balsa slit the assassin's throat at the same moment that he cut her side open.

Both Balsa and the assassin stood frozen for a moment. Then the assassin collapsed, bleeding, to the snow-white ground.

Balsa verified that the assassin was no longer moving, then pressed down hard on her side. Chagum stood in front of her, partially obscured by whirls of snow. "Chagum?" Balsa choked out.

There was a sound like a whistle. Chagum took a few steps closer. "Balsa."

As Chagum hugged her, Balsa realized that he was taller than she was now.

Epilogue - Digging through Snow

Chagum shivered violently from cold and fear and pain. Balsa hugged him tight to her chest and didn't let go. His teeth chattered as he said, "Balsa? Is it really you? Or is this just a dream?"

Balsa smiled. "Maybe you're right, and it is a dream. I can't believe how big you've gotten." She let him go slowly and stared at him as if she wasn't fully convinced that he was real. It was growing dark, so she couldn't see him terribly well, but there was an alarmingly bloody cut on the right side of his face.

"He cut you good, didn't he?" Balsa muttered. She touched the edges of the wound very lightly. It extended from the middle of his forehead to the corner of his right eye. It was too dark for her to treat it and stitch it closed now, but it seemed that the cold of the winter was good for one thing: the wound, though quite deep, had already stopped bleeding. It would need to be stitched eventually, but right now, her most immediate concern was to make sure it didn't gush open again.

"Let's some pressure on that," she said. "This will probably hurt."She pinched at the edges of his wound and pressed down. Then she ripped off a piece of her shuma face covering and used it as a bandage. She wrapped the piece of cloth all the way around his head and tied it tightly off. She lifted up Chagum's own face covering and then resettled it so that the edges were tucked inside his coat for more warmth.

"How bad does it hurt?" she asked.

"Not bad," he said. His teeth still chattered. "It feels numb. The edges hurt a little, but it's fine." He rubbed his arms. "Did you see any sign of Rotan soldiers on your way here?"

Balsa nodded slowly. "Both of them were cut down."

Chagum froze. "So...they're both dead, then?" His lips trembled; he looked like he was trying not to cry. "It's my fault. They protected me. They were good men, they--they were married and had kids..."

Chagum started walking in fits and starts away from Balsa. Balsa grabbed his shoulder.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"We have to bury them," he said.

"The snow has covered them already," she said, pulling Chagum in closer. "We also don't have shovels, or any other tools, or time."

"But..."

Seeing Chagum's hesitancy, Balsa said, "Listen." Her tone was sharp, but not angry. "You've never lived through a Rotan winter. This blizzard is going to get much worse before it lets up. There are wolves in this forest, a lot of them. We can't let the horses stay out here any more than we can stay out here ourselves.

"Those soldiers died to save you. Don't waste their deaths. Think only about your own survival, now."

Chagum remained still and silent, shivering.

"The snow has buried them," Balsa said. "Let that be their funeral, for now. We'll say a prayer for them."

Chagum hesitated for a long moment, then nodded. Balsa led him closer to the place where she'd seen the fallen soldiers. "Bow your head." Chagum did. There was a long, silent moment that stretched out. The snow seemed to muffle all sound; even the horse's hooves were silent as they shuffled across the ground.

Chagum was a bit surprised that the skittish horse had remained so close. Then he realized that the poor animal's reins had gotten caught in the underbrush. Balsa led Chagum over to the horse and helped him mount up. Then she located a pine torch in the horse's saddlebags.

Her fingers were numb with cold. She blew on them to get some feeling back into them, then lit the torch. The flame struggled to stay lit as the heavy, wet snow fell upon it; Balsa didn't think the torch would last them very long.

Balsa took Chagum's horse by the bridle and started looking for one of the huts that the herders and ranchers built along the road to help

travelers in winter. She found one in about half an hour, sheltered in a grove of snowy trees. By the time she found it, both Balsa and Chagum were numb and shaking with cold.

When Balsa helped Chagum dismount, she realized that he was unconscious. Balsa's own horse was a smart animal and had followed them through the snow.

Chagum was so heavy. She carried him into the hut at a snail's pace with snow swirling around her shoulders. She shut the door, then lay Chagum out on the floor. She used the last gasp of her pine torch to light a fire in the room's low hearth, which was already packed with dry firewood.

Balsa returned to Chagum and removed his thick leather boots. The skin revealed was pale and cold to the touch. She needed to warm him up; the effects of frostbite could be dangerous if not treated quickly. He also hadn't stirred since she'd put him down.

"Chagum!" she called out, shaking his shoulders. "Wake up. You have to stay awake."

Chagum groaned and opened his eyes the barest sliver. His wounds hurt.

"Listen closely to me, Chagum," Balsa said. "Can you hear me? Do you understand?"

Chagum nodded weakly.

"Can you feel your fingers and toes? Try to move them."

His fingers and toes did move some. Balsa started rubbing his limbs to help him warm up faster. He frowned and flinched away from her at first, then relaxed a little.

"How do your hands and feet feel?" Balsa asked.

"Better," he said.

Balsa sighed in relief and settled Chagum's legs more comfortably on the floor. Chagum's eyes were still closed. Balsa continued to rub his

feet until she saw a faint pink flush return to his skin. Chagum started gasping in pain.

"Hold on a little longer," Balsa said. "If we don't get this fixed right now, you might never walk right again."

She switched to his hands after she finished rubbing his feet. When she was satisfied that she'd done all she could for the moment, she inspected the wound in her own side. It was shallow and no longer bleeding.

Balsa wiped down the wound with a clean cloth, then removed her belt and wrapped it around the injury. She stood up, testing her movements. She had a mountain of things to do.

Balsa removed her coat, then Chagum's; she took them outside to shake the snow off them, then hung them up to dry. She rubbed her own limbs to get more feeling back into them; she was still cold. She felt pins and needles, painful, as the blood rushed back into her fingers and toes.

When she could move her fingers nimbly again, Balsa knelt down next to Chagum and lifted up the shuma face covering. Chagum was sleeping and didn't wake, even when she lifted the face covering completely off.

His injury appeared far worse in the light of the fire than it had in the dim gloom outside the hut. She saw that the blade that had cut his forehead had pierced his skin all the way down to his right cheek. However, she'd made the right call in trying to stop the bleeding first: the wound had scabbed over and didn't appear infected or inflamed.

Balsa boiled snow for hot water and began to wash Chagum's face in preparation for putting on a fresh bandage. Chagum flinched and turned away from her, but Balsa held him down, gently but firmly. She wrapped the wound with a clean strip of cloth. It was difficult to wrap the bandage and hold Chagum still at the same time, but she managed.

"Are you hurt?" Chagum asked hoarsely.

"I'm fine," she said. "You will be, too. I wish Tanda were here; he'd be able to treat these wounds a lot better than I can."

Chagum smiled a little. "How is Tanda? Do you know?"

"The same as he always is. You know him; he never changes. He's older, but we all are."

Chagum fell asleep with his slight smile still on his lips. Balsa supported his head in her lap and listened to his quiet breathing. "Well, maybe I shouldn't say that...you've changed a lot. You're a young man now," she whispered.

His face was deeply suntanned, just as it had been the last time she'd seen him as a boy. His features had solidified and spread a little, but she easily saw the boy she'd known in his face. She wanted to sit with him until he woke up, but she still had things to do. She stood up carefully so she wouldn't wake him.

Balsa brought the horses into a small sheltered livestock pen with a roof that was directly next to the hut where she and Chagum had taken refuge. She had to take care of their needs before she could go to sleep herself.

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Snow kept falling outside.

Balsa dozed fitfully while sitting up, watching over Chagum and adding fresh firewood whenever the fire burned down low. When roughly half the night had passed, Chagum shifted uncomfortably in his sleep. Balsa felt his forehead and discovered that he had a high fever.

Balsa placed a cold, wet cloth that she soaked in snow on his forehead, then started boiling water to clean his wound again. Chagum coughed violently and cried out, "Run away! Get away from here, now!"

Balsa held on to Chagum and pushed him down. "Chagum? Chagum! It's all right. You're safe here. You're having a dream. It's just a nightmare."

Chagum opened his eyes and looked up at Balsa. "People...the capital...all destroyed. Everyone has to run. Run now." He closed his eyes

again. His body went completely limp in Balsa's arms. Balsa wiped the sweat from his forehead and checked his fever. He was far from home; he must be having nightmares that Kosenkyo was in danger.

Chagum remained asleep but restless until dawn, when he relaxed into a deeper sleep. Balsa finally permitted herself to stretch out and fall asleep. The snow was still falling when she awoke later that morning. She looked outside and found the sky grim and colorless.

Sometime in the afternoon, Chagum's fever rose a little. He awoke with a groan and a severe frown; the wound on his face looked inflamed and painful, though he didn't complain. He hugged himself a little and sat up. Balsa brought food for them both from Chagum's pack. She boiled some of the dried meat and potatoes in a pot to make a simple stew. Chagum managed to eat about half a bowl before refusing to be fed any more.

At nightfall, Chagum's fever broke. He was able to get up and move on his own without too much pain or dizziness. Balsa gave Chagum unleavened bread called bam to dip in leftover stew, then added some honey to boiling water to make a sweet tea. Chagum pinched his bam into small pieces before dipping it into the stew. He was very careful about not touching his wound as he ate.

Balsa finished her portion of dinner and set her dishes aside. "You're looking better," she said. "The color's returned to your face. I think if we rest for another day, your face probably won't hurt much anymore."

Chagum said nothing in response. He stared into the flames of the fire in the hearth. He stared for quite a while, then gripped his frostbitten left leg with his right hand. "Balsa."

"Yeah?" she asked.

"I'm...dead," he said. "I mean as the Crown Prince. Everyone in New Yogo believes I died in Sangal. I escaped Talsh and the palace in the slim hope that Rota and Kanbal would listen to me, but I have no power or authority to make any alliances. I'm powerless." He frowned at the fire.

"When I jumped off that ship, all I was thinking of was getting to Rota in time. If Rota managed to send reinforcements before Talsh attacked, we might have stood a chance. I hoped my father would see the wisdom of the alliance and set aside our past grievances to work with our allies.

I thought that if only I just kept going, some kind of way forward would appear for me--but I was wrong."

Chagum clenched his fists. "It was all just a child's dream." Chagum covered his face with his fists and froze still in that position.

Balsa ladled hot water into cups for tea. "It's understandable to be upset."

Chagum didn't react to what she'd said at first. When he peeked out at her from behind his hands, she smiled at him. "I don't really know if your plan was a child's dream or not. But I understand that you're sad not to be the Crown Prince anymore--even though you used to hate that role."

Chagum opened his mouth to say something, then closed it.

"When I saw you last, you would have been overjoyed if you could have stopped being the Crown Prince."

"That's..." He hung his head and didn't say anything else.

"When I started searching for you, everyone thought you were dead. When I learned you were alive, I was happy. You were living as just Chagum, free from the chains of responsibility and leadership that were put on you when you were born. That's what I thought." She paused. "If--when--New Yogo is destroyed, it won't be your fault. It's your hard-hearted father's fault for not realizing he needs help, and asking for it. Isn't that right?"

She waited for him to say something. When he remained silent, she said, "You're sixteen years old. Why do you think all the world's burdens are your own? Well, I won't let you shoulder them. I know that no one wants war--not the Mikado or New Yogo's people--but if the imperial palace is destroyed, so be it. You've gotten this far and come out alive. It's all right to stop, take a breath, and let go of the things you can't control. No one will blame you for the outcome of the war. You can live in peace, free from responsibility for others for the rest of your life, if that's what you choose."

Chagum blinked. He'd never seen his situation in quite that light before. He felt a whole lot better, like someone had turned on a lamp in

the darkness. Cool air soothed the heat of his fever. He'd been so focused on doing everything that he possibly could to save New Yogo for so long that he'd completely failed to understand his position until now.

"But even if I do choose to live in peace, it won't be easy. Not anymore."

Balsa frowned at him a little. He'd seen his situation in a new light, but he seemed just as sad as he'd been before.

"And it's not responsibility or any sort of heavy burden that I'm carrying," Chagum said. "It's a dream." He started to cry. "I want to save my mother and my sister. I don't want New Yogo to be overrun and subjugated by Talsh. I don't want to lose to Prince Raul. I...I just want New Yogo's people to be happy."

Chagum was no longer the same little boy who had cried from disgust and revulsion at the idea of returning to the imperial palace of Kosenkyo. No trace of that boy was left in him. If New Yogo's people suffered, Chagum suffered, too. Chagum couldn't separate his own well-being from that of his homeland; not anymore. He had no choice but to keep moving forward and chasing his dream, no matter how lonely and hopeless the journey felt. He couldn't smile at the path that lay ahead of him, but he also could not turn aside from it.

"Chagum," Balsa said. "Hugo gave me a message for you. Would you like to hear it?"

Chagum's eyes went wide. "Hugo? You met him?" He frowned. "Hugo...is strange. I know he's an enemy, but I can't seem to hate him."

Balsa chuckled. "He was definitely weird." She described, briefly, how she and Hugo had met. "Here's what he wanted to say to you: 'I want to help Crown Prince Chagum. He's planning to create an alliance between all the nations of the northern continent. If he wants to actually succeed, then he has to go to Kanbal, and soon--before he sees the King of Rota. What's needed now is an alliance between Rota and Kanbal.'"

Chagum's face lit up as he understood the implications of Hugo's message. "Rota and Kanbal, be allies?"

Balsa watched color return to Chagum's pale face. "Yes--yes, that just might work. The King of Rota and the King of Kanbal might agree, king to king. They can form a wall strong enough to repel the Talsh. Prince Raul wouldn't be able to take over the northern continent so easily then..." His eyes shone with excitement; he almost smiled, but then his smile collapsed.

"But, uh," he said, sounding a little confused, "why would Hugo, of all people, want to tell me something like that?

"He said he always wanted to govern a province, but Prince Raul would have to become the Talsh Emperor for that to happen." Balsa told Chagum everything that Hugo had said, as best she could remember. Chagum listened to her with a serious and absorbed expression.

After she was done speaking, Chagum stared at the floor and thought for a long while. Then he raised his head and said, "No matter what happens with New Yogo, Rota and Kanbal being allies would grant undeniable benefits to both countries. I want to make that alliance happen, if I can."

Balsa nodded. "Prince Ihan told me that Rota would accept an alliance with Kanbal."

Chagum blinked in surprise. "Prince Ihan really said that?"

Balsa smiled. "He didn't want to reject your proposal of an alliance, either--it seems like circumstances forced his hand. I got the feeling that if you'd been the Mikado, he would have agreed to support you with everything he had."

Tears fell from Chagum's eyes and spilled onto the floor. He frowned as if he were in intense pain.

"Don't touch your wound,"Balsa said. "It'll only hurt more."

Chagum smiled.

Balsa added more wood to the fire, then turned back to Chagum. "Winter comes faster to Kanbal than it does to Rota; it's probably already buried in snow. We need to get ready for a long, hard journey across the mountains. We should probably backtrack to Toluan a bit to

wait out the blizzard and resupply. I know it would slow you down a little, but--"

"No," Chagum said. "It was my decision to go to Kanbal. I have to go; I can't delay." He stared at Balsa for a moment that stretched, then shifted his gaze to the fire.

He had jumped off his ship and swum across the vast ocean to Rota. He remembered being so exhausted and thirsty that first morning, when he'd washed up on the beach near a village. It had taken days to find a ship that would give him safe passage to Rota; he'd burned with impatience during the seemingly endless search. And then he'd finally reached Rota and been captured by one of the southern clan lords. He'd escaped confinement with the Kashal's help and finally met with Prince Ihan to propose his alliance. He remembered the hopelessness and despair of his long journey,then set those feelings aside. He had to keep going, even if what he wanted to achieve was impossible.

He was still alive. There were still things that only he could do. The warmth of the fire spread inside him. "Balsa," he said quietly as he looked at the flames. "Will you take me to Kanbal?"

"Yes," Balsa said. "I'll take you to my homeland. It echoes with the flapping of hawks' wings as they clean the bones off everything dead. All men and women are poor there, even the king. But I'll take you there. For all its poverty, Kanbal, too, has beautiful places. I'll show them to you."

The flames of the fire flickered. Balsa and Chagum looked across at one another, warm and together at last.

This is the end of *Guardian of Heaven and Earth - Rota*. The story continues in *Guardian of Heaven and Earth - Kanbal.*

Author's Afterword and Notes

It's been ten years since I wrote the first Moribito novel. I never thought that I'd be writing the series for this long. I'm grateful and humbled that this first installment of Guardian of Heaven and Earth has finally been published. In the afterword to Traveler of the Blue Road, I wrote about how the strands of Balsa and Chagum's stories had separated, but in this volume, they finally reunite. Like two flowing streams, the story strands have merged together into a vast river. The story will flow out from these story strands all the way to the end. The end of the story is one that Balsa and Chagum will share together.

Uehashi Nahoko

August 20, 2006

Abiko